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Prologue

Starry-furred cats of all shapes and sizes gathered around one stone. On top of that stone sat four cats, all of equal importance; Maplestar, Cloudstar, Wolfstar, and Meadowstar. They were the founders of MapleClan, CloudClan, WolfClan, and MeadowClan. However, they had all once been apart of either ThunderClan, ShadowClan, RiverClan, or WindClan; the original four Clans. Maplestar had been a ShadowClanner, Meadowstar a WindClanner, Wolfstar a ThunderClanner, and Cloudstar a RiverClanner. The four Clans had been destroyed by twolegs a long time ago, and those four cats had been the only survivors, so they migrated elsewhere, and made their homes somewhere far away from the reach of twolegs.

Now, their homes were in danger once more. If the Clans were destroyed by The Dark Forest -- or by Breezeflame -- StarClan would be destroyed as well, and peace would not exist for any cat, whether they were apart of a Clan or not -- and these four leaders were not about to let something so horrid happen to their beloved home and Clans. Wolfstar spoke, his voice loud and authoritative, to the rest of the StarClanners. "Do you see what is happening to our homes?!" He waited for no response as he continued; "We cannot allow this! The Dark Forest cats may think that they are almighty, but they are nothing compared to the power of the five Clans!" The StarClan cats yowled their agreement.

All four cats raised their tail simultaneously, and the cats immediately quieted down in response. Cloudstar picked up where Wolfstar left off, her voice strong and clear, "We are stronger than them all! The same goes for Breezeflame - she may think of herself as strong, but she is nothing! She and the little Clan of rogues that she is creating are weak; they are cowards. They feed off of fear, as cowards do! But we don't fear them, and we never will!"

Meadowstar spoke now. "As Cloudstar said, they are weak-minded cowards -- feeding off of fear, killing kits, and placing the blame on

others! Cowards, kit-killers, and traitors have absolutely no place in the forest! So what do you think we must do?!"

"Chase them out!" The StarClanners yowled simultaneously, and Cloudstar nodded, her unsheathed, glowing claws scraping openly against the rock below her.

"Yes! But how are we to do that?" Cloudstar glanced at Maplestar, waiting for him to start.

Maplestar cleared his throat, looking down at the gathered StarClan cats. "We have given hope to the Clans in the form of a red-furred kit. However, this cat does not know her true strength, and therefore, before she can save the Clans, she must learn. But how is she to learn?" The StarClan cats glanced at eachother uneasily, murmuring to the cats sitting next to them, and the four leaders watched every movement with an intense gaze. "She is to learn by believing in herself, and believing in the true power of StarClan, which many cats cannot do. She is to learn by witnessing the true horrors of the forest, and what the Dark Forest can plague upon them. And finally, she is to learn by making mistakes, as all cats have; even Riverstar, Windstar, Thunderstar, and Shadowstar." he blinked down at the cats. "Do any of you disagree with my teachings?" All cats shook their head, and Maplestar sat back on the stone, wrapping his tail around his paws with a satisfied look on his face. "Good.

"And that, is how the Clans are to be saved," Maplestar announced. "Froststar, Toadleap; I would like for the both of you to send a message to Skyhawk about this the next time he goes to the Shining Stone at Halfmoon."

"Sleetstar, Fogsecret; you two are to be the cats to give the message to Silvercloud, next time she goes to the Shining Stone. Do I make myself clear on this?" Cloudstar said.

"Yes, Silvercloud," Sleetstar answered.

"Of course," Fogsecret replied.

Wolfstar cut off anyone else who tried speaking, and said,

"Swanpaw; you are the cat I want to give the message to Gingerfur. Your life was cut short because of a mistake, and I trust you for this job," he said, and Swanpaw nodded, narrowing her eyes in thought.

Meadowstar looked at the face of a recently-deceased deputy, and decided that he would be the one to tell the message to her Clan. "Stonestep, I would like for you to give the message to Nightfrost, if that would not be too much trouble for you." she stated, knowing that Stonestep had been rather troublesome when he was alive.

"No, no! Not at all, Meadowstar -- not at all!" Stonestep responded, shuffling his paws as he watched her. Meadowstar nodded her approval, then turned her gaze towards the sky -- as did all the StarClan cats - as a voice rang out above StarClan. The voice sounded like one cat, yet also like Riverstar, Thunderstar, Shadowstar, and Windstar, the four original leaders of the four original Clans, were talking all at once.

"In order for Breezeflame and the Dark Forest to be banished from the Clans' lives once and for all, a spark will have to be ignited in the form of a single red-furred cat, and the Clans' will have to allow her to set the whole forest ablaze."

Chapter One

A tall, red-furred she-kit played with her littermates -- her name was Redkit, second-oldest kit in Berryfrost's second litter of four. Her littermates consisted of Mousekit, Frostkit, and Mosskit. Mousekit was a small, amber-eyed white she-kit with brown patches and a speckled tail. Frostkit was a small silver tom with white speckles on his flank and rump along with blue eyes. And Mosskit was a ginger tabby she-kit with amber eyes just like Mousekit's own.

However, their casual playing and playfighting was stopped short as dawn patrol entered camp, along with a small, gray tom whom Redkit didn't know. Redkit glanced over at her mother, whose lips pulled back in a snarl as soon as she spotted the cat. "Who is that, Berryfrost?" Redkit asked warily, wondering if she should approach or just stand back. The apprentices, though, seemed to be trying to intimidate him. The gray tom was practically their size, but looked older, so Redkit figured that he was just unnaturally small. He paid the apprentices no heed other than flicking his tail or an ear in warning if they got too close to him.

"Loststar!" the leader of the patrol -- Ravencall, his name was -- called. "Your son, I am afraid, wants to speak to you!" he said, a wary tone in his voice. Mosskit, from beside Redkit, gasped.

"I didn't know Loststar had a son!" Frostkit mewed, cutting his sisters off as he looked up at his mother. They were all clearly waiting for an explanation. Berryfrost's lips curled in disgust at the very thought of the gray tom.

"She does. His name is Skyhawk, and he ... ruined my first litter." Berryfrost spat out in anger, but not at her kits. No, it was at Skyhawk. The siblings looked at each other, wondering exactly what Berryfrost meant by "ruined."

"Wait," Redkit said after a few moments, finally putting the pieces of the puzzle together. "By ruined, do you mean he ... he *killed*

them?" she questioned, shocked. Berryfrost sighed.

"You always were a clever one, Redkit. Yes, that's what I meant by ruined. Skyhawk is not to be trusted. I'm surprised that dawn patrol even allowed him into camp," she responded, but stopped short whenever Loststar walked out of her den, tail lashing in contempt as she gazed down at her son. He didn't even flinch as he sat down before her, just stared at her head-on, a challenge in his eyes.

"What do you want, Skyhawk?" Loststar asked him, and although she looked as strong as ever, there was a trace of pain laced into her voice. "I thought I had made it clear when I banished you that you were no longer welcome here. Have you decided to come crawling back to us?" she asked, causing Skyhawk to snort.

"Not exactly, Loststar," he answered, giving his chest fur a few quick licks. "Actually, I have a few things that I need to share with you." he said, and Loststar waited for a minute or two, yet Skyhawk never continued.

"Well?" she prompted. "If you have anything to share, then you must share it with the Clan as well."

"No. I would rather discuss what I am about to say in private." Skyhawk said.

Loststar hesitated before replying, "And how do I know you won't just try to corner me in my den and kill me, like you killed those two kits?" she growled at him, pain still evident in her voice as her tail thumped against the ground.

Skyhawk reeled back, an emotion flickering in his eyes but disappearing before Redkit had a chance to decipher what it was. "I never killed those kits!" he hissed, his claws flexing.

"Then who did?! You were the one to give them the deathberries!" Loststar demanded, her fur bristling as she stood up to her full height.

"I - they looked like juniper berries, okay?! And it wasn't my fault - it was Breezeflame's!" Loststar snorted in disbelief at his response,

about to open her mouth to reply before noticing that a crowd was beginning to form around them.

Narrowing her eyes, Loststar beckoned with her tail towards the entrance of her den. "Fine. We will further discuss this in private." she ordered, walking into her den.

"Discuss it? This doesn't sound like a discussion, it sounds more like an argument if you ask me," Skyhawk stated, but followed her into the den anyways.

"Well, guess what? No one asked you," Loststar said.

"Oh, isn't that new?!" Skyhawk said, a sarcastic tone in his voice, and that was the last thing Redkit heard of their conversation -- or, argument, is more like it -- before their voices dropped down to hushed, yet still angry, whispers and she was no longer able to pick out the words that they were saying.

"That was weird," Frostkit commented flatly. Mosskit and Mousekit murmured their agreements, but Redkit remained silent. *'Who's Breezeflame?'* she wondered, not noticing the fact that Berryfrost was watching her with a plainly curious expression on her face. Finally, Redkit whirled around to face her mother.

"Who's Breezeflame?" she asked her, before adding, "And what did she do? Why would she kill your kits?" she questioned, and she was about to continue before Berryfrost raised her tail to stop her whirlpool of questions that most of which could not be answered in a way that was appropriate for a kit her age.

"Breezeflame was a MeadowClan warrior that got banished from her Clan for committing very bad deeds. Deeds that went against the warrior code, which is the law set down by our warrior ancestors a long, long time ago. Afterwards, she infiltrated MapleClan, posing as one of the she-cats. Did I ever tell you how MapleClan used to treat their she's?" she asked, and Redkit shook her head 'no.' "Well, that is another story for a different time. As I was saying, she infiltrated MapleClan, and set a band of rogue's out to attack us. She was the leader of that group of rogue's, and after the damage had been done from the attack, she lead the rogue's away, leaving

MapleClan behind."

"Oh ... well, did the attack get anyone killed?" Redkit asked, and Berryfrost shook her head.

"No, nobody got killed in the attack. Though I have a feeling that if she attacks again, something will happen that we would not exactly like," she sighed, then said, her fur bristling slightly, "I doubt that Breezeflame was in charge of my litter's killing, though. It was Skyhawk's fault. It had to have been. It would've been impossible for Breezeflame to sneak into camp and do something to those berries, knowing that they'd have to be used eventually," she said. "Don't you think?" she asked, looking down at her daughter, who was watching her siblings play The Warrior, The Badger, and The Leader.

"I think so, too," Redkit admitted, and when Berryfrost noticed her watching her siblings play, she smiled at her daughter.

"Go play with your brothers and sisters -- I'm sure they have another spot open for you in their little game," she said with a wink, and without hesitation, Redkit nodded, rushing forward to play with her littermates.

"Do you have another spot open for me?!" Redkit asked them, and they all stopped playing, turning to look at her. "I know you're playing The Warrior, The Badger, and The Leader, but that's only for three cats!" she mewed, and they all glanced at each other. For a moment, Redkit thought they weren't going to allow her to play with them, and she felt slightly disheartened, but then Mousekit stepped forward.

"We could change the game to The Warrior*s,* The Badger, and The Leader! Or - ooh! We could change it to The Warrior, The Badger*s,* and The Leader!" Mousekit pointed out, and the other two kits nodded eagerly.

"I vote for The Warrior, The Badger*s,* and The Leader! What do you all think?" Redkit asked, and they all nodded. "That way it'll be more evenly matched! There won't be two cats attacking the badger, instead each cat will have their own badger, and each

badger their own cat!" she meowed.

"I like that idea!" Frostkit meowed, nodding eagerly.

"So, Redkit, are you going to be a badger or a warrior?" Mosskit asked her sister, coming over to stand beside her.

"Actually, I think that Redkit should be the leader!" Frostkit mewed.

"But I thought you were going to be the leader, Frostkit! That's what you were in the last round!" Mousekit said, and Redkit couldn't help but to feel a bit honored that her brother would want her to be the leader, even if it was just a game that they were playing, and not the real world.

Frostkit shrugged. "I changed my mind -- besides, I think Redkit would make a better leader!" he pointed out with adoration in his voice, and if Redkit didn't have fur, she was sure that her skin would've been bright red by now, from her ears all the way to the tip of her tail.

"Well, it doesn't matter who's who!" Mosskit said. "I call being one of the badgers, though! They're always so fun to be!" she mewed.

"I agree with you, Mosskit," Redkit spoke up for the first time in awhile, her voice kind of meek from all the embarrassment she was facing because of Frostkit's compliment. Mosskit shot an appreciative smile at her sister from over her shoulder.

"I'll be a badger, too," Frostkit decided.

"Well, I guess I have no other choice than to be the warrior, do I?" Mousekit chuckled, and Redkit smiled. "Okay then, let the game begin!" Mousekit said. Redkit couldn't help but to think that sometimes Mousekit was a little bossy, even though she had only been born maybe two minutes before the rest of her siblings, if even that much.

Frostkit and Mosskit tried sneaking up on their siblings, since they were the badgers, but Mousekit spotted them before they could. "Oh, no -- look, Redstar! Badgers! We can't let them destroy the camp!" Mousekit -- otherwise known as Mousestep in their little

game - exclaimed, and Redkit looked behind her just in time to avoid being pounced on by Mosskit. She quickly scrambled a few feet away, before whirling quickly around and making Mosskit, who had been chasing after her, bump clumsily into her sister's body and falling to the ground, giving Redkit the chance to easily pin her, which she did.

Frostkit, upon seeing that his badger comrade was almost defeated, let out a high-pitched yowl and turned away from where he was currently play fighting with Mousekit to pounce on Redkit and gently push her off of his 'badger friend.' Redkit laughed upon being swatted gently away from Mosskit and forced onto her back by Frostkit, She allowed him to pin her down, even though she knew that she could easily break out of her smaller sibling's grip if she wanted to. That wouldn't be fair on Frostkit, though, so she didn't.

"Redstar!" Mousekit meowed, her voice feigning surprise as she watched her get pinned down. When they played this game, the leader was always on their last life, so that it'd be fair on the badger, or badgers*,* in this round, and they wouldn't have to defeat the leader a dozen times before they'd ever get the chance to win the game.

As soon as you got pinned down for more than 15 seconds, you were considered 'dead' in the game and had to sit out for the rest of it. Mousekit quickly rushed over to try and get Frostkit off of her so that the leader would live, but unfortunately, it was too late. Mousekit hadn't arrived quick enough, and 15 seconds had already passed, so Redkit was considered 'dead.'

"Good game," Frostkit whispered before jumping off of her to go play fight with Mousekit. They were pretty evenly matched - Mousekit was the oldest of the litter, and Frostkit and Mosskit were the two youngest, so the play fight was actually kind of fair if you thought about it.

Redkit pulled herself up from the ground, shaking the dirt and mud off of her fur from being down on the ground quite a few times in the game, and went to sit back down next to Berryfrost to watch.

She heard a voice behind her. "That was a good game, Redkit!" the

voice obviously belonged to a warrior, and Redkit blinked, turning around to look at whoever was speaking to her. It was Foxfur, the smallest and youngest of the last litter that Cherryflower would probably ever have, since she seemed quite content being a warrior now instead of a queen, like she had been before. Redkit smiled, turning around to look at him.

"Thanks!" she meowed.

"You could've easily pushed Frostkit off of you if you wanted to, but you didn't, because you knew that wouldn't be fair on him. Right?" he said, and Redkit nodded, curious as to where he was going with this.

"That was very kind of you," Foxfur pointed out, and Redkit realized that Foxfur's siblings must have done the same thing with him whenever they play fought as kits and apprentices, since he had been the smallest of them all.

"Hey, Foxfur!" a deep voice said from the entrance of camp. "We haven't got all day, you know! We need to stock up the fresh-kill pile -- Firehawk's orders!" Redkit glanced behind the tom in front of her and noticed that the voice belonged to Wolftail, one of Foxfur's older brothers. Bearjaws was sitting beside him with his apprentice, Mudpaw, but Badgerclaw was nowhere to be found.

Foxfur flicked his ears. "I got to run, but it was fun talking to you, Redkit," Foxfur meowed before turning and walking over to his brothers. Bearjaws laughed slightly at his brother, and Mudpaw looked as if she was trying to hide snicker, but for what reason Redkit did not know, before the four cats turned tail and left camp.

"That was pretty weird," Redkit mumbled to herself before continuing her walk over to Berryfrost, who was currently lying down in the shade of the nursery and chatting with Rosestorm.

Redkit sat down next to where her mother was laying. Berryfrost looked up as she approached, and she smiled down at her daughter. "That was a nice thing you did for your brother out there, Redkit," Rosestorm commented casually. "Letting him win like that. Honestly, I doubt any other kit in your position would've done the

same thing," she meowed.

"Yea, Foxfur told me the same thing," Redkit pointed out, wondering when they would stop making such a big deal out of her letting her brother beat her in a simple game. Frostkit had been nice enough to allow her to be the leader even though he had originally planned on being the leader himself, and so she had decided to let him win because that had been a pretty kind thing for him to do.

Berryfrost's ears perked at this. "Hmmm ... what's Foxfur doing talking to you?" she mused, lashing her tail. Foxfur was the only cat out of his littermates that didn't happen to be a troublemaker, or a bully. But usually warriors only associated with other warriors or their apprentices unless they had kits of their own. And kits generally only talked to or played with other kits, but sometimes they would talk to apprentices.

"I dunno," Redkit said. "I was wondering about that, too," she admitted. That was the first time a warrior other than her mother or her father, or any of their friends -- like Rosestorm, for example -- had ever complimented her on their own terms. It sort of surprised her, really. Foxfur wasn't that bad of a warrior. He was one of the best hunters in the Clan, and he was almost always busy with hunting patrols that everyone always wanted him on. Even in leaf-bare, he rarely managed to come back empty-pawed. He would stay out hunting past night-fall if it meant feeding the Clan, and for that he was fairly respected amongst the warriors of the Clan.

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey, please gather beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting!" Loststar called from her position on the top of the Highrock, and Redkit looked up in surprise as she heard her voice. She hadn't even noticed Loststar exiting her den, nonetheless Skyhawk, who stood underneath the Highrock with a self-satisfied smirk embedded on his face. Granted, Skyhawk was hard to spot anyways, due to his size, but still.

Berryfrost noticed Skyhawk standing there, and a look of contempt washed over her face. At least now Redkit understood exactly why she disliked the tom so much, since she now knew the reason why. However, their tempers seemed to have cooled down quite a bit,

and it seemed as if they had come to terms with a mutual agreement. Cats watched Skyhawk with either wariness or aggression written all over their faces, but if any of them tried threatening them, Loststar gave them a warning look, as if telling them to back off from her son.

Berryfrost and Rosestorm left Redkit at the nursery, walking over to join the cats gathering below the Highrock. Redkit's littermates stopped playing and walked back over to her, sitting or lying down next to where she was. Kits weren't supposed to join in on Clan meetings at all, which included listening to them, but most of them did anyways, and no one ever really bothered saying anything about it.

"Skyhawk is from here on forward, no longer banished from MapleClan. He is to be granted back the full privileges of a medicine cat, and he will be allowed an apprentice whenever he decides that he should take one on. Now, before any of you question my choi - " she was cut off as Berryfrost hissed in outrage, trying to spring forward to the front of the crowd to tackle Skyhawk, but was stopped by her mate, Stoneflight.

"What do you think you're doing, Loststar?! Allowing a kit-killer to join your Clan?" she spat out, her fur bristled in pure fury. Loststar narrowed her eyes at Berryfrost, staring hard at the she-cat with a level glare, as if waiting for her to silence herself. Berryfrost seemed to wilt under the heavy weight of her leader's gaze, and some of her fur flattened out as she gradually calmed down.

"As I was saying," Loststar continued. " ... before any of you decide to question my choices -- again, I might add - Skyhawk has a story to share with you." she said, and then looked down at her son. "Skyhawk, please tell them exactly what you told me."

After Skyhawk recounted exactly what all had happened to him after he had been banished from MapleClan, everyone was left speechless with either shock, anger, or fear shadowing their features. He had told about MeadowClan, about what Nightfrost had said to him, and about how when he was on his way back to

MapleClan, he had managed to spot Breezeflame conversing with a group of rogues. But it hadn't just been rogues - he had managed to spot Clan cats in there, too. Two of Breezeflame's cats had been engaging in a savage, bloody battle as Skyhawk eavesdropped, and in the end, only one cat emerged from the battle. It had been an unfamiliar black she-cat with scars criss-crossing her pelt, most likely rogue or an exiled warrior from one of the other Clans.

Skyhawk had been forced to stop eavesdropping as some of the cats managed to move closer to where he was, as he had been afraid they would pick up his scent. So he had escaped from the area, and continued on his way towards MapleClan to tell them about it.

Berryfrost still didn't seem completely believing that Breezeflame was in charge of her kit's murder -- even to Redkit it didn't seem very logical, really - but she did seem to accept and trust Skyhawk a little bit more now - at least now she wasn't trying to attack him. She still looked at him with something that wasn't quite what one would consider friendliness, though, and that was a tad bit worrying.

Finally, Loststar decided to end the meeting with a simple "meeting dismissed," and since it was almost night-fall, Berryfrost walked over to her kits and nudged them into the nursery, intent on getting them to sleep, while Redkit herself was only intent on not getting nightmares of the Breezeflame sort.

Chapter Two

Two Moons Later

Redkit woke up very early on this day, for a very specific reason - this day, she was six moons old, and that meant she could finally, *finally,* become an apprentice. After six moons of waiting and playing, she was ready, and so were her siblings, for that matter. She shook Frostkit, nudged Mosspaw, and shouted in Mousepaw's ear excitedly to wake them up, thinking that maybe if they woke up early, they'd be made apprentices earlier than if they woke up late. Berryfrost sighed as she watched her kits.

"Calm down, Redkit," she admonished. "You and your littermates aren't the only ones in the nursery - some of the other kits and queens are still trying to sleep, including me," she said. Redkit grumbled under her breath, and Berryfrost sighed unhappily. "Get some more sleep. The dawn patrol hasn't even went out yet -- it's too early for a kit to be awake," she pointed out.

Redkit sighed, settling back down beside her littermates and mother. "Fine. Once I'm an apprentice, though, you can't boss me around anymore," she stated, and Berryfrost rolled her eyes.

"No, because I won't have to. You'll be bossed around by your mentor and all of the other warriors instead," she pointed out, causing Redkit's face to drop dramatically. She snickered. "Really though, get some rest. You have a big day ahead of you, and you'll be needing all of the rest that you can get," she said, and Redkit admitted defeat, laying her head down on her paws and closing her eyes.

Redkit couldn't sleep. Although she was trying, she simply couldn't; she was too excited. Her siblings, however, were still sleeping peacefully beside her, and finally she decided that she couldn't take it much longer -- she was going to die of boredom if she didn't find

something to do! Nudging her mother gently to see if she was asleep, she found out that she was. Redkit smiled to herself at that, and she pulled herself to her paws, quietly snaking her way out from between her siblings. She snuck out of the nursery, pawsteps as quiet as those of a mouse.

Redkit glanced around camp, hoping to find something to do. Very few cats were awake. Not even Loststar or Firehawk were awake -- Loststar always woke up early so that she could watch over her Clan from the Highrock, and Firehawk woke up early to either organize or go on the dawn patrol, usually both. She noticed that Milkdrop, an elder, was awake and lying by the elder's den, his face stoic of any emotion. Milkdrop was young -- he was slightly older than Loststar, who was only 32 moons old. In a fatal accident, however, he had lost both of his ears, rendering him deaf, and Loststar had forced him to retire to the elder''s den, not even giving him a chance to try and become a warrior again.

The accident happened when Rockfall, Fernshade, and Milkdrop went out on a hunting patrol together. Rockfall came back unharmed, carrying a dead Fernshade in his jaws and gently guiding Milkdrop along. Milkdrop had been bleeding severely out of the places where his ears once were, and was rushed to Skyhawk's den immediately, who told the Clan that there was nothing he could do about Milkdrop's ears. He would never hear again -- his life would forever remain without sound. Since they could not ask Milkdrop what had happened while out on patrol, they were forced to ask Rockfall, who claimed that a group of vicious rogues had attacked them. However, many cats were suspicious of Rockfall, because if rogues had truly attacked, why had Rockfall been left unharmed, save for just a couple of scratches? Even Redkit had to admit that it didn't make much sense.

So, Redkit couldn't talk to Milkdrop, since he wouldn't be able to hear her. She heard some shuffling sounds coming from the medicine cat's den, though, and she turned, rushing over to the medicine cat's den in a quiet enough way that she was sure almost no one could hear her. But as she arrived in the entrance of the den and looked into the damp cave that was Skyhawk's den, she noticed that he had turned from whatever he was doing and was looking

over his shoulder towards the entrance, which quite obviously meant he had heard Redkit running.

Redkit stopped short, slightly embarrassed at being caught like that, before adventuring further into the medicine cat's den. Water was dripping from the ceiling and sliding down the walls - it made Redkit wonder how Skyhawk could stand to sleep in here. It wasn't nearly as warm as any of the other dens she had been in, which she found strange. "What are you doing?" she asked the small gray tom, trying to peek over his shoulder.

"I could ask you the same thing," Skyhawk shot back in response, and Redkit faltered, taking a small step backwards. Skyhawk sighed, looking down at a bundle of herbs. "If you really want to know that bad, I'm mixing herbs," he answered.

"Oh ... what's that?" she asked.

"Exactly what it sounds like. It's when you mix herbs to make poultices." he answered, pawing at some marigold. Redkit had a million things going through her head at the moment, and that was never good, so the conversation quickly turned bad when she decided to ask a couple of mouse-brained questions.

"Why are you so mean all the time?" she asked him, causing Skyhawk to drop the herb bundle in his jaws in shock. His fur bristled slightly, and Redkit should have taken that as a warning sign, but she didn't, and continued on talking. "Don't you have any friends that can make you happy?" she was quite curious about this, now.

"No." Skyhawk replied tersely, the muscles in his shoulders bunching up and then relaxing back down. He turned away from Redkit and the herbs that he had been mixing, walking over to another corner of the den where a small bloodstain that no cat had ever bothered to wash away was at. He looked sad, and Redkit, for the life of her, couldn't figure out why. "My only true friend was Toadleap, and he's dead now." he said, voice monotone. Well, now Redkit knew the reason why.

"Oh ... that's sad. But what about Loststar, isn't she your friend? Or

Rockfall - he's your father, isn't he?" she asked curiously, wondering why the tom before her couldn't just be happy for once.

"Loststar is the exact reason I'm so 'mean,' as you call it," Skyhawk said, jerking his head away to face the wall. "And Rockfall never cared. When I was a kit I was bullied, and he never even*attempted* to make an *attempt* at *trying* to help me!" he said, his voice raising slightly in volume and bouncing back from the walls of the den.

"What do you mean, Loststar is the reason that you're so mean? She's your mother - aren't they supposed to ... aren't they supposed to teach their kits to be good and nice? Didn't she - doesn't she love you? She allowed you back into the Clan -- I mean, that must be because she loves you!" Redkit wanted to ask more, but was cut off as a sharp laugh escaped from Skyhawk's lips.

"She's the reason I'm stuck in a den all day sorting herbs when I should be outside hunting, or patrolling, or defending the territory from enemies and invaders." he said, face screwing up in obvious disdain from his situation. "And yes, oh yes, she loved me. *Loves.* But that was probably because I'm the only surviving kit from the only litter she's ever had, and hopefully ever will have. I was the runt of the litter, and in a freak incident, my siblings were murdered yet I, for some reason, was spared by StarClan of such a fate. I'm sure if my littermates were still alive, she'd be paying more attention to them than she ever would to me," he said, voice full of self-deprecation.

"Really? But ... don't you get to choose whether you want to become a medicine cat or a warrior?" Redkit questioned, confused by all of this new information entering her already crowded brain.

Skyhawk snorted. "I wish. Loststar probably figured that I was weak because of my size, so she decided to throw me to the wolves - and, by that, I mean that she didn't even give me a say in the matter of me becoming a medicine cat. I had no other choice." he said, before shuffling back over to where the herbs were and beginning to mix them, painfully slowly, once more. "Anyway, what are you doing up so early anyways, kit?" he asked, clearly wanting to change the subject. Redkit decided that it would be best not to push him any further than she already had.

"Well, my apprentice ceremony is today! So I'm excited, and I couldn't get to sleep because of that," she mewed.

"Hmm ... well, hope you have a good one." Skyhawk said monotonously, not even stopping once in his work.

"A good what?" Redkit asked.

"A good apprentice ceremony, mouse-brain," Skyhawk ground out, and Redkit could practically hear the eye-roll in his voice without even having to turn and look at him. After a few moments of silence, Skyhawk added thoughtfully, "You're lucky that you'll get to train and become a warrior later, you know. I would kill to be able to do that."

Redkit was silent for a few minutes, and she shuffled her paws uncomfortably before meekly saying, "I know." Skyhawk snorted but didn't respond, continuing to transform the herbs in front of him into useful poultices.

After awhile, Redkit heard a voice behind her, and she almost jumped out of her skin as she realized who it was. "Redkit!" Berryfrost scolded, reaching over and grabbing her kit by the scruff. "What do you think you're doing in here?!" she asked, rather loudly, and Skyhawk ignored them both, focusing on his job, although his ears flicked occasionally, signaling that he was listening to what they were saying.

Berryfrost took Redkit out of the medicine cat's den, dropping her gently on the ground outside of the nursery. "What do you think you were doing in there, conversing with that ... that ... *cat?!* I was worried sick when I woke up and noticed you were missing, and to find you in his den alone ... " she murmured, trailing off as she watched her daughter.

"Skyhawk's not that bad, though, Berryfrost! Just a little misunderstood. If only you gave him a chance -- you'd probably understand then!" she exclaimed, standing up.

"I understand everything," Berryfrost snapped. "I don't want you going anywhere near that little runt until you have your head

sorted out. You're too excited about the ceremony to be thinking straight," she meowed. Redkit frowned at this, ears drooping, and she felt discouraged as she walked back into the nursery to talk to and play with her siblings before they all became apprentices, and could no longer do kit-play without making total idiots of themselves.

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey, please gather beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting!" Loststar called out to her Clan in the evening that day, and Redkit felt as if her heart was about to beat out of her chest. Her excitement had faded away sometime earlier, and now it was replaced by pure and utter nervousness. Who would her mentor be, and would he or she like her? What if she made an idiot of herself on her first day of training? The other apprentices would never like her if that happened! A million thoughts were rushing through her head once more as she and her siblings all scrambled to gather, for the first time, with the other Clan cats below Loststar and the Highrock.

"Four kits in the Clan -- Mousekit, Mosskit, Redkit, and Frostkit -- are now six moons old and ready to become apprentices and begin their training. Therefore, I will perform a ceremony for them, as I always do," she meowed. "Mosskit, please step forward." she said, and Mosskit obeyed, taking a tentative couple of steps closer until she was in front of the gathered cats and directly in Loststar's line of sight.

"Mosskit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day forward, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Mosspaw. Your mentor will be Foxfur. I hope Foxfur will pass down all he knows to you." she paused intentionally, before locking eyes with Foxfur. "Foxfur, please step forward." He did so.

"Foxfur, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You had received excellent training from Bluemask, and you have shown yourself to be courageous and hardworking. You will be the mentor of Mosspaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to Mosspaw." Loststar finished, and Foxfur nodded, walking over to Mosspaw and

touching noses with his new apprentice.

"Mosspaw! Mosspaw! Mosspaw!" the Clan cheered, before dying down as Loststar raised her tail to signal for silence. Mosspaw sat down next to Foxfur, obviously wanting to get to know her mentor a bit better.

"Redkit, please step forward," Loststar meowed, and Redkit looked up, her eyes blinking in shock as her name was called. As she walked over to the front of the crowd, it felt almost as if she was walking on water. "Redkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Redpaw. Your mentor will be Woodlash. I hope Woodlash will pass down all he knows to you," she said, and then turned to Woodlash, who had already stepped to the front of the crowd. He was a senior warrior, and had survived through many things, including a near-fatal gash in his side, and Redpaw felt honored to have him as her mentor.

"Woodlash, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You had received training from Thornscratch, and you have shown yourself to be brave and determined. You will be the mentor of Redpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to Redpaw."

Redpaw carefully stepped forward, reaching up so that she could touch noses with her new mentor. Woodlash smiled at her encouragingly, and soon Redpaw returned to where Mousekit and Frostkit were sitting, waiting patiently - or impatiently, in Frostki's case - for their apprentice ceremonies to begin.

The other ceremonies of her littermates passed by in a strong blur. Frostkit -- Frost*paw* -- ended up with Rockfall as his mentor, and Mousekit -- Mouse*paw* -- Newtheart. Their mentors had all decided together that their training would begin bright and early tomorrow morning. Redpaw couldn't wait. Would they explore the territory first? Maybe they would learn to hunt, or battle train! Just the very prospect of training to become a warrior excited her immensely.

"I wonder what training will be like!" Frostpaw exclaimed, sitting

down next to his siblings near a patch of rubble, a half-eaten squirrel seated in front of him.

"Hopefully it will be good," Mousepaw meowed. "I'm worried about your training though, Frostpaw. You have a very harsh cat for a mentor. Will you know how to stick up for yourself if he tries to push you too hard?" Mousepaw asked, concerned, and Frostpaw rolled his eyes.

"Of course I do!" he said in between taking bites of his squirrel. "I can manage having Rockfall as a mentor, trust me! Don't worry," he smiled at Mousepaw, and his tone made it sound as if he thought the very prospect of someone worrying or fretting over him was silly.

"Of course you can," Mousepaw said eventually, nodding in agreement, although her tone didn't drop that concerned edge. She polished off the remains of the shrew that she and Mosspaw had been sharing together, and Redpaw took a couple of bites out of the fish in front of her, which she had hardly eaten from.

"Hey, earth to Redpaw? Are you okay?" Mosspaw asked curiously, dangling a paw in front of her sister's zoned-out face. Redpaw blinked, snapping out of a random daze, and she nodded, smiling.

"Yeah, I'm okay! I was just thinking about what tomorrow's training session will be like, is all." she said, and Mosspaw nodded, seemingly satisfied with the answer as she laid back down. Redpaw turned her attention over to where Mudpaw, Owlpaw, and Silentpaw were all three being lead out of camp by each of their respective mentors, presumably to train together. She sighed longingly, hardly feeling that she would be able to wait for tomorrow to come. If there had ever been a day that she had wanted to speed up time, it would definitely be today.

Redpaw blinked, looking over her shoulder as she heard small pawsteps behind her. It was Cricketpaw. "Hey, can I join you?" she asked. Mousepaw blinked several times before nodding, lashing her tail and motioning around the open space surrounding her and her littermates.

"Of course," she meowed encouragingly, and Cricketpaw sighed, sitting down next to where Redpaw was.

"Thanks. My mentor, and those other apprentices, can be such a pain sometimes," she said, frowning. Redpaw studied her facial expression slowly before responding.

"Oh, really? Who is your mentor?" she asked, flicking her tail in curiosity.

"Ravencall," Cricketpaw answered automatically.

"What's so bad about him that makes him such a thorn in your side that you have to stay away from him?" Mosspaw asked, breaking away from the conversation she had been having with Frostpaw, who now seemed more interested in his squirrel than her, anyways.

Cricketpaw sighed, studying the ground. "Well, nothing really ... it's just - he acts really strange sometimes. Odd, even. And dumb. Can't forget dumb. I'm not sure if there was ever one smart sentence that came out of the cat's mouth before in his life," she said, lowering her voice a bit so that Ravencall couldn't hear her, even though he was all the way on the other side of camp.

Frostpaw snickered. "Are you sure he's dumb, or are you just saying that because you don't like him or because you think he's a bad mentor?" he asked abruptly, and Cricketpaw switched her gaze from the ground back to him, shocked by his bluntness.

Mosspaw sighed, standing up before anything could break out between Frostpaw and Cricketpaw. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm going to go get some sleep before we start training tomorrow."

"Sleep? Really?" Redpaw asked. "You slept past dawn and I had to wake you up for your apprentice ceremony. I don't think you need any more sleep," she snickered, and Mosspaw shot her the evil eye but didn't reply as she headed over to the apprentice's den.

"I'm with her," Mousepaw said, standing up and trotting into the apprentice's den after her sister.

"Me, too," Cricketpaw said, deciding to tag along with them.

"Oh! Uh ... me, three!" Frostpaw piped in, padding after the other cats. Redpaw sighed, finishing off what was remaining of her fish and standing up. She knew that she would be needing rest, especially, for tomorrow - she had been awake since before even dawn patrol had been sent out, and that was quite early in itself.

She walked into the apprentice's den, lying down in an empty moss nest that was smothered between Webpaw's and Echopaw's. She curled further into herself, folding her tail over her nose and squeezing her eyes shut, hoping to get some sleep tonight, since excitement usually kept her from sleeping properly.

Redpaw's eyes shot open almost as soon as they closed. She soon realized, however, that she was no longer in the cozy apprentice's den, surrounded by multiple other apprentices like herself and her littermates. There was no trace of their scents anywhere - actually, there was no trace of even a MapleClan *scent anywhere, which was quite strange.*

Redpaw didn't have any time to ponder on this however, for she soon heard sharp crackling, popping noises coming from behind her. She whirled around, gasping in horror as she saw a once beautiful maple tree being burned to the ground, and eventually, left as nothing but a charred stump, nowhere near as close as to what it once was. Behind that stump and it's ashes, she spotted two cats, both of them gray and undecipherable, talking to each other. They did not seem to be conversing with each other in a very friendly way, however. As a matter of fact, their exchange seemed to be more ... businesslike. It was as if they were doing each other favors, and repaying them with more favors.

Redpaw felt a comforting presence beside her, but when she turned to look at whoever it might be, she found that no one was beside her, which was awfully strange. She frowned, and suddenly, her eyes shot open once more.

Redpaw woke up, panting loudly, her breath ragged from the effects

of the dream -- actually, it was really what she wanted to call a nightmare, but she felt as if it might mean something. Echopaw and Webpaw both twitched from beside her, but luckily, they did not wake up, unlike some of the other apprentices in the den.

"Hey, you! Can you shut up?" it was Owlpaw who said this.

"Yeah! Some of us are actually trying to sleep," Mudpaw sneered, a hateful tone in her voice. Redpaw took an immediate disliking to these two cats.

"Sorry, but I can't please everyone," Redpaw snarked, feeling brave after the dream. Mudpaw's lips curled in disgust as she looked Redpaw over, and Owlpaw's fur bristled.

"Whatever," Mudpaw finally mumbled, before turning back over on her side to rest -- and that was the end of that discussion. Redpaw, finally managing to get her breathing under control, sighed, stretching. She knew she wouldn't be able to get anymore sleep tonight, just like how it had been yesterday. However, this time, it was different.

Because this time, instead of feeling as if she had been enveloped by excitement, she felt as if she had just been swallowed whole by an overwhelming sense of dread and fear.

Chapter Three

Redpaw's eyes opened as sunlight filtered in through the cracks of the stone of the apprentice's den. She waited a moment, blinking several times, for her vision to get adjusted to the light before pulling herself to her paws. She shook out all of the moss and dirt clinging to her fur, and looked around to see that Frostpaw's and Mousepaw's moss nests were empty, though their scents still lingered in the den.

She glanced over at Mosspaw, who was gradually waking up as well. "Mosspaw?" she whispered, careful not to wake the other sleeping apprentices in the den, specifically Mudpaw and Owlpaw. She didn't like those two cats at all. Mosspaw twitched a bit, then lifted her head from her paws to look at Redpaw. "Where's Mousepaw and Frostpaw?"

Mosspaw blinked, looking around as if she had only just now noticed they were missing. She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I remember waking up earlier this morning and seeing Frostpaw leave the den. I was pretty sure I heard Rockfall out there, too, so maybe he and Rockfall had went to go train by themselves," she said. "And Mousepaw? I dunno where she went."

Redpaw frowned as she said this, and started walking towards the entrance of the den. "Well, I'm going to go look for them. Join me if you want," she offered, looking over her shoulder at her sister, who shook her head and laid her head back down on her paws, signaling that she was going to go back to sleep. Redpaw sighed, walking out of the den. Almost as soon as she exited, she heard friendly laughter coming from the other side of camp.

She turned her head, seeing that Mousepaw and Cricketpaw were sitting side by side, sharing a thrush from the fresh-kill pile. Redpaw frowned; she was pretty sure that apprentices were only allowed to eat after they had hunted to feed the elders, though she decided not to call them out on it. She padded over to the two she-cats. "Hey, Mousepaw?" she said, and Mousepaw's head shot up to

gaze at her. "Do you know where Frostpaw is?" she asked.

"No," Mousepaw admitted after a few moments. "He's probably out with Frostpaw somewhere -- I don't know," she said, shrugging her shoulders in the same manner that Mosspaw had back in the den.

"Well, thanks. You were a big help," Redpaw said sarcastically, before adding, "Also, you know you're not supposed to be eating that, right?" she said, causing Mousepaw to glare at her.

"Everyone's busy. No one's going to know that Cricketpaw and I snuck one little tiny thrush out of the fresh-kill pile," Mousepaw said, rolling her eyes as if she wasn't breaking the warrior code. Redpaw frowned again, before turning around.

"Okay, whatever you say then, Mousepaw," she responded, before turning tail and heading out of camp. She really didn't know her way around the territory, primarily because she hadn't ever been outside of the confines of the camp before, but she didn't quite care, either. Maybe she could explore a little bit on her own while searching for Frostpaw.

Redpaw heard loud splashing sounds, and she gasped as she saw a huge waterfall in front of her that lead into a pond down below it. She slowly approached it before leaning down and taking a couple of laps from it -- it tasted much better than the small puddle situated near the elder's den that any cat was free to take a drink from. She pulled back, licking her lips.

Her ears twitched as she heard bushes rustling behind her, and she turned around just to be nose-to-nose with Frostpaw ... and a mouse. "Hey, guess what?! I caught a mouse!" he exclaimed. Redpaw snorted.

"I see that," she answered. "What were you doing this whole time?" she asked, sitting down and backing away a bit from her brother so that there would be some space between them. Frostpaw rolled his eyes at her question.

"Hunting, what else?"

"I know you were hunting, mouse-brain. But who were you with? Were you out here with your mentor? You couldn't have just caught a mouse all by yourself without receiving any training or instructions first, I don't think," Redpaw pointed out, and Frostpaw blinked.

"Oh! That's what you meant -- yeah, I was out here with Rockfall! He taught me some hunting, and he showed me the best places to find the different types of prey in the territory!" he meowed.

"That's nice, Frostpaw. I'm sure you'll grow to become one of the best hunters MapleClan has ever seen, if not *the* best," Redpaw purred. For the first time since she found Frostpaw, though, she looked over his white-furred pelt and noticed some small scratches scattered all around. She blinked, suddenly standing up. "Frostpaw, where did those scratches come from?" she asked, alarmed.

"Oh, I just ran into some thistles while hunting -- nothing serious!" Frostpaw said quickly, then decided to change the subject, even though Redpaw wasn't very comfortable with that. "Rockfall said that he'd show me someplace special if I keep hunting like I am!" he said with twinkling eyes, while Redpaw's own eyes narrowed as she thought about what that could mean. In her mind, saying something like that didn't sound quite right, especially coming from a cat like Rockfall.

"Well ... if Rockfall thinks you're so good, why don't you show me some of your hunting moves? Can you fish?" she asked.

"Well, I haven't tried fishing, but it seems like it would be easy," Frostpaw meowed before padding over to the pond below the waterfall. The pond was not shallow, but Redpaw felt as if as long Frostpaw didn't walk too close to the edge, he'd be fine. Frostpaw slipped one paw into the water with his claws unsheathed, and he started moving it around, feeling for a fish. Eventually he saw one, and he grabbed it, pulling it up above the surface of the water, but it slipped out of his grip. He leaned forwards, attempting to grasp at the fish with either his jaws or his paws, Redpaw wasn't sure which. Then he fell forwards, falling into the water.

"Frostpaw!" Redpaw yowled, jumping into the water without

hesitation, not even remembering that she couldn't swim. She grasped for her brother, the water tearing at her pelt and eventually dragging her down.

Redpaw opened her eyes, ignoring the stinging it caused her, and then she spotted Frostpaw. He had sunk like a stone to the bottom of the pond. He wasn't moving, which was very unlike him, so obviously he had fallen unconscious. She sunk her teeth into his scruff, knowing that his weight would drag her down even more, but not caring. She hooked her paws on a rock and attempted to push herself forwards, but she didn't quite reach the surface. She tried it again, yet only her nose had reached the top of the water.

She finally hooked her paws onto a larger rock and then shot herself upwards in one powerful stroke. Her head broke the surface and she scrambled towards the shore, sinking her claws into the ground and dragging herself forwards, gasping like a fish out of water all the while. Eventually, she made it, and she collapsed, dropping Frostpaw down on the ground beside her. She could hardly breathe, and she was trembling because of how cold the water had been. She wondered if she had hypothermia.

Her vision became blurry, and she saw three wobbly, concerned figures in front of her. As one of the blurry figures picked her up, she finally allowed her eyes to close for the first time since falling in the water.

Redpaw blacked out.

When Redpaw's eyes opened once more, she found that she was in the same nest as Frostpaw, and that they were in a very damp, cold den. She was still trembling - shaking, really - from the frigid temperatures of the water, but not as much. Frostpaw and her also happened to be very close to one another, which made her wonder. "S ... Skyhawk?" she coughed, her voice shaky as she saw the small gray tom moving around in his den.

Skyhawk stopped whatever he was doing. "Good, you're awake," he meowed as he walked over to the two of them. "Sorry for putting

you both in the same nest, it must be weird for you. But you two had hypothermia, and that's not good." he said, then looked down at her brother, who had been unconscious since he had fallen into the water. "Frostpaw ... hasn't woken up yet." he said, a worried tone in his voice. Redpaw decided to shrug it off; she knew that he would wake up eventually.

"Who were those three cats that rescued us?" she questioned, curious. Skyhawk frowned.

"It was a CloudClan patrol, actually -- Tigerpaw, Jayfrost, and Runestone," he stated. Redpaw blinked several times as he said this -- CloudClan couldn't have rescued them without being forced to cross the borders, and wouldn't that be breaking the warrior code? You weren't allowed to cross the borders unless you were trying to make it to the Shining Stone, or you had something important to tell the Clans that couldn't wait until the next Gathering, which rarely happened.

"Weird," she murmured to no one but herself, but Skyhawk still nodded in agreement. He turned around, pulling two things out of his storage; chamomile and juniper berries.

"Here," he meowed, offering them to her. "Eat these," he ordered.

Redpaw looked down at them suspiciously, not knowing what they were for. "Are you sure those are really juniper berries?" she asked, poking one suspiciously with her paw.

Skyhawk grunted something, knowing exactly what Redpaw was referring to as she made the remark. "Yes, I'm sure. I even tried a few of them myself earlier just to be careful. Now, eat them," he demanded, and Redpaw nodded, gulping the chamomile and juniper berries down. She heard pawsteps behind her and she looked over her shoulder, spotting Berryfrost, who had a very worried look on her face.

"Oh, Redpaw!" she meowed, leaning down and licking her on the head. Redpaw sighed, irritated. She wasn't a kit anymore; she was an apprentice, even if it had only been for a day! "You were unconscious for three days! I was so worried," she murmured.

Redpaw's eyes widened; she had been knocked out for three days?! She had missed her first training session!

"I missed my first training session!" she complained.

"Yes, and you'll be missing quite a few more while you recover," Berryfrost pointed out, and Redpaw groaned, resting her head on her paws. Most of her trembling had died down, but for some reason, Frostpaw's was just getting worse. "Don't worry, though; you'll catch up!" she purred, before turning her attention to Frostpaw. "Is he okay?" she asked, concerned. Skyhawk sighed.

"I'm not sure if he'll survive through this, Berryfrost," Skyhawk said. "First of all, he's very small; don't look at me like that -- that's rude. And, it seems as if he got the brunt of it. If Redpaw hadn't been there to help him, then he would probably already be .. " Skyhawk swallowed as he noticed Berryfrost's expression, a combination of both angry and devastated.

"Who are you to say that my kit will or will not live?!" she demanded, and Skyhawk stomped his paw down onto the ground -- **hard.**

"Look at him! He still hasn't woken up yet, and it's been three days! *Three days.* And he's still shaking, even though he's gaining body heat from Redpaw!" he spat. "If he doesn't get heated up soon -- as much as I hate to say it -- there will be little to no hope for him," he pointed out.

Berryfrost sighed, slumping down. "I'll go get your sisters," she said, licking Redpaw on the head once more before turning and exiting the den, her trail drooping behind her as she did so. Redpaw frowned.

"Lightpaw!" Skyhawk called to a pretty she-cat that Redpaw had only just now noticed in the back of the den. "Can you go fetch some more moss for me? Frostpaw needs all the heat that he can get," he said, and Lightpaw nodded, rushing out of the den to get it.

"Is she your new apprentice?" Redpaw asked.

"Yes," Skyhawk meowed, just as Mousepaw walked into the den, Mosspaw trailing behind her.

"Hey, Redpaw," they meowed coolly, though their eyes quickly became worried as they saw the state that their only brother was in. Skyhawk took a few steps back, deciding to give them some space to talk as a family. Lightpaw entered the den after a few moments, and she quickly tucked some more moss into the area of the nest that Frostpaw was situated in. Only a little bit of his shaking died down, but at least it was a start.

"What's wrong with him?" Mosspaw asked, worry clearly gnawing at her.

"He has severe hypothermia," Skyhawk replied, not even looking up from what he was doing with some of his herbs. From what Redpaw could see, it looked as if he was simply organizing them. Mousepaw gasped.

"He'll be fine, though, right?" she asked, making Skyhawk pause.

"I'm not sure," he answered, guilt in his voice at having to say this about an apprentice, to a bunch of apprentices that were his *sisters.*

"Do you think ... do you think he'd be able to cool down if we-we ... if we got in there with him?" Mosspaw asked, looking worriedly at her brother. *'I'm here, too, you know. He's not the only one that almost drowned,'* Redpaw thought, but decided would be better to not say aloud.

"Possibly," Skyhawk said. "All I know is that it definitely wouldn't hurt to try," he said, basically giving them permission to do so if they wanted -- and they did. Mousepaw got on the side of Frostpaw that Redpaw wasn't on, while Mosspaw got the area above her brother's head. A lot of Frostpaw's shaking seemed to stop after a couple of minutes of the three cats lying there like that with him, but not all of it stopped -- and he still didn't wake up from unconsciousness, which clearly wasn't a good sign. "Is he waking up? I think I saw him twitch," Skyhawk meowed.

Redpaw shook her head. "No ... " she responded.

Skyhawk sighed. "Lightpaw, can you please go get Redpaw something to eat? She *must* be hungry," he said, and as soon as he said that, Redpaw's belly growled. However, nobody laughed at the pure irony of it, because they were all so worried about Frostpaw and how his recovery was going -- and it didn't seem to be going all that great.

Lightpaw nodded, smiling at Redpaw, who smiled back, before exiting the den and heading towards the fresh-kill pile. She came back very quickly, a magpie situated in-between her jaws. To be honest, Redpaw wasn't that big a fan of birds, but right now, she didn't care. She felt as if she could devour the whole fresh-kill pile right now if she wanted, birds included or not.

Lightpaw dropped the magpie in front of Redpaw, who nodded her thanks before ripping her teeth into the plump, flying creature. She sighed, satisfied by the food. "Hey ... R-Redpaw?" Mousepaw said, and Redpaw looked up from her piece of prey, shocked at hearing Mousepaw stutter. She had never once stuttered before in all the time that Redpaw had been around her!

"Yeah?" Redpaw asked, wiping the magpie's blood away from her mouth with her tongue. "What is it? What's wrong?" she asked, only just now noticing her sister's horrified expression.

"I-I .. Frostpaw ... " she meowed, and Redpaw looked down at her brother, before noticing something; he wasn't moving.

He wasn't breathing.

And his heart wasn't beating.

Chapter Four

"What is it?" Skyhawk asked from behind them. Redpaw was too terrified to speak. She carefully leaned down, pressing her ear against her brother's chest. She felt nothing; she felt no comforting beat of his heart, she didn't feel his gentle breath tickling her fur. She could feel her eyes well up with tears, and she tried to blink them back, but it was hard.

"This isn't fair ... " Mosspaw murmured, pressing her light pink nose into her brother's chest. Skyhawk seemed to understand what was going on now, and he padded forward quietly, lavender in his jaws. Mosspaw looked up at this.

"Why are you carrying lavender? There's nothing you can do to fix this," she meowed. "He's ... he's already dead. There's nothing you can do. Nothing that anybody will ever be able to do." Mosspaw pointed out, her face already mournful. Mousepaw nuzzled her face into Frostpaw's neck, while Redpaw simply breathed in her dead brother's relaxing scent that was slowly starting to fade into the stench of death.

"This isn't a herb used to cure cats, Mosspaw," Skyhawk meowed. "Lavender is most commonly used to hide the stench of death," Skyhawk sighed, clearly wishing that Frostpaw hadn't died. "I'm sorry that I couldn't do anything more to help your brother -- we were out of feverfew. Unfortunately, they are rarely in stock at this time of year," he said, flattening his white-gray ears against his head.

Redpaw removed her nose from her brother's fur. "It's fine," she sniffed. "We know that you did everything you could, and that's all .. that's all we could ask for. Thank you," she meowed. Skyhawk blinked, clearly not having expected such kind words from one of Berryfrost's daughters, the only she-cat in MapleClan that hated his guts for no reason other than her own naivety.

"Please, take a step back from Frostpaw's body," Skyhawk ordered,

ad all three she-cat's did so. Skyhawk rubbed the purple herb all over the little white tom's body and sighed, breathing in the sweet smell of the lavender that began to circle the den. "I'm so sorry that you had to die at such a young age, Frostpaw," he murmured before taking a step back from the lifeless body. "We must tell the Clan," he pointed out, and all three she-cat's nodded, speechless after witnessing the death of their only beloved brother.

"You may stay here with your brother if you wish, though his body will have to be carried out to the center of the camp soon, so that the others may mourn his death," Skyhawk said, and nobody bothered to say anything -- instead, they just nodded their heads in solent agreement. Skyhawk cleared his throat and then nodded, leaning down to pick up Frostpaw by the scruff. He walked out of the den, and Redpaw soon let out a desolate sigh, tail and ears drooping as low as they could go.

"This isn't fair," Mosspaw repeated her exact same words from earlier, except this time her eyes were twinkling with unshed tears. "All he ever wanted was to become a warrior, and what did StarClan decide to do? Take him away!" she spat, sinking her claws into the damp earth and flexing.

Redpaw heard noise coming from outside of the medicine cat's den, so she poked her head out of the entrance. She spotted Skyhawk speaking to Loststar, while multiple cats. both young and old, gathered around the young Frostpaw's body. "This was never meant to happen," the long-legged, red-furred she-cat meowed as she looked towards Silverpelt. "Why must they take away the lives of those so young?" she questioned to no one but herself. As soon as Redpaw uttered these words, memories of her past dream came rushing back to her. She shivered, remember the heat of the flame as they engulfed the maple tree and all in it's way, before revealing the two cats behind it. She closed her eyes for a split second before opening them again, and padding out of the medicine cat's den.

Berryfrost was hysterical. This was the third kit that she had lost in around six or seven moons, so of course it was rather understandable. Tears were streaming down her cheeks as she clawed the ground to shreds near her son's body. "StarClan!" she gasped, voice coming in sharp hiccups. "Why have you ... why have

you forsaken me so? What makes you so desperately want to take away my kits?!" she yowled to the stars. Stoneflight appeared beside her, eyes glimmering with untold sadness as he wrapped his blue-gray tail around his mate's body. He leaned in, whispering comforting words into the she-cats ear, and soon her yowls turned into choked sobs.

Mudpaw padded out of the apprentice's den, her black-brown tail lashing angrily behind her. "Can't a she-cat get any sleep around here?" she spat, looking pointedly at Redpaw as if accusing her for her awakening. Upon hearing these words, Berryfrost whirled around to face the apprentice, her fangs bared in a menacing expression. Mudpaw gulped, taking a step back.

"My son has just died, Mudpaw!" Berryfrost hissed, her fur bristling and tail rising all the way up in authority over the apprentice. Mudpaw nodded, eyes widening, before rushing back into the apprentice's den, tail between her legs. Berryfrost's eyes soon refilled with tears, and she glanced down at her son, smoothening his beautiful white and silver coat with a gentle tongue. "You would've made a fine warrior one day, dear ... if only StarClan had given you the chance," she murmured, pushing her nose into his fur with a soft sigh.

Rockfall walked up behind the she-cat. "He had been turning into a brilliant hunter -- he could've ended up as good a hunter as Foxfur one day, if only he had been given the chance," he said, expression mournful. "He caught a mouse on the first try -- never have I ever seen an apprentice do that before," the massive gray tom admitted, and Berryfrost nodded, heart bursting with pride for her skilled dead son.

"I am so sorry for your loss," Sunflare stated from behind Berryfrost. Berryfrost's ears flickered in acknowledgment, and she began to nuzzle her cheek into her son's silver-speckled flank.

"Thank you, Sunflare," the white and ginger she-cat whispered sadly.

"As am I," Cherryflower frowned as she stepped in beside Berryfrost. "Rockfall was right in saying that Frostpaw would've one day

become a great warrior. No one would've ever been able to have doubted that," she sighed. Berryfrost simply nodded. Cherryflower had lost many kits of her own before, so she could easily understand the intense pain that Berryfrost was going through. The same was to be said with Sunflare; she had lost her kit, Seedkit, to Breezeflame many moons ago, and she had almost lost her mate, Woodlash, as well.

The elders were watching from the elder's den for their cue to bring Frostpaw's body to his burial site, somewhere out of camp. Milkdrop was seen behind Minnowcreek, the oldest cat in the Clan, the places where his ears once were twitching disturbingly. Redpaw forced herself to look away from the tom, not wanting to be disrespectful. She trotted over to stand beside her mother, licking her brother's white, unmoving chest and flattening it.

Mousepaw and Mosspaw soon joined her, as well as Cricketpaw. Cricketpaw murmured a few words that Redpaw was unable to hear into his ears, then took a step back with a frown on her face. "All cats old enough to catch their own prey, please gather beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting!" a loud voice boomed over the clearing, and Redpaw looked up, slightly alarmed, at Loststar as she stood on the edge of the Highrock.

"Unfortunately," Loststar began with an audible sigh. "We have lost an honorable apprentice today, due to the terrible effects of hypothermia. Had he lived to become a warrior, we all know that he would have become a great one," she meowed, dipping her head as she glanced at his mentor, Rockfall, who appeared to be devastated by the death of his apprentice.

"I would like for the elders to go on and perform his burial, please," she ordered. Minnowcreek and Darkscratch padded forward, Milkdrop reluctantly trailing behind them. He clearly did not think he should be doing elder's duties when he was still young enough to be considered a warrior, despite his injuries, and Redpaw couldn't exactly find it in her heart to blame him for that.

The elders grabbed him by his legs, carrying him out of camp with Milkdrop doing most of the work, since he was still as strong as any newly-made warrior, save for his obvious deafness.

Redpaw watched sadly as her brother was carried out of camp, her eyes shining. She sighed, glancing away as her mentor totted over to her, a sad and tired look on his face. She tried not to stare at the gruesome scar stretching across the expanse of Woodlash's left side, knowing that it would be considered impolite. "I'm so sorry," he whispered.

Redpaw shrugged, glancing down at her paws. "There was nothing you could have done to stop it ... or anyone, really," she stated, and Woodlash nodded in agreement, a solemn look on his handsome face.

"Training will start tomorrow," he declared. "Since you haven't gotten any training so far because of the hypothermia, I'll have to work you extra hard," he pointed out. Redpaw's whiskers twitched.

"That's fine," she meowed, and Woodlash nodded, padding off with a satisfied expression on his face.

When Redpaw tried to get some sleep that night, the apprentice's den felt unbelievably empty.

Redpaw was awoken by a loud snoring in her ear. She turned her head to the side, bewildered, only to be greeted by Owlpaw's peacefully sleeping face. *'Great StarClan! And she complains about me waking her up!'* she thought, before shoving the white and gray she-cat away from her mossy nest. She waited a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the light, then stood up, padding out of the den.

She could see Bluemask, Whiteclaw, and Frostsong returning from dawn patrol -- Frostsong had some prey in her jaws, so Redpaw concluded that they must have done some hunting while marking the borders as well. She looked up at the sky, noticing that clouds were gathering, and she remembered that leaf-bare would be coming soon.

Woodlash walked over to her from where he had been sharing tongues with Sunflare, and she glanced up at the sound of the brown tabby tom's pawsteps. "You ready for training?" he asked,

nodding his head towards the camp entrance. His eyes had a sort of cloudiness to them, as if he was still sort of sad about the fate of Frostpaw.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Redpaw sighed, shuffling her paws.

"Good," Woodlash said, and nodded once. "Would you like to train with your sisters, or do you want to have some time to catch up to their skill level? I don't think it would be fair to pit you three against each other when you are literally only just beginning training," he said. Redpaw shrugged her shoulders, unsure. She wouldn't really care to go up against her sisters; Mosspaw was sort of clumsy, which she could easily use to her advantage, and Mousepaw just wasn't all that bright to begin with.

"I don't know. Might as well train by myself for now," Redpaw responded, and Woodlash nodded, ears flicking in vague agreement.

"Come," he said, walking towards the entrance of the camp. His scar took on a "shining" effect under the glow of the sunlight, and Redpaw forced herself to look away from the gruesome sight. It had not been too long ago that he had received the scar from one of Breezeflame's cats, but it had healed up quite nicely under the careful watch of Toadleap, at the time, and Skyhawk. "There's a nice hunting grounds called The Rocks around here. Plenty of plump mice and voles are known to dwell in their crevices," he meowed.

On the way to The Rocks, they passed the waterfall. A shiver wracked Redpaw's body just by hearing the sound of the rushing water. She knew from then on she would most likely never be able to look at that waterfall the same way again without being reminded of Frostpaw's terrible demise.

Woodlash soon turned around, and Redpaw almost bumped into the large tabby's chest, but managed to stop herself just in time. "Easy there," he grinned, and Redpaw flattened her ears to her head, slightly embarrassed, as she took a few steps backward from his body. "Now, the first thing you're going to have to perfect is a hunting crouch. It's not hard to do; simply crouch with your body low to the ground and your legs ready to spring at the nearest

moving piece of prey. However, you have to remember not to let your tail sweep across the ground; rustling leaves and cracking twigs would easily alert the prey in the area of your presence!" he meowed, before dropping down low into an example of the move.

Redpaw watched the warrior for a moment before trying to do it herself. She could set her paws right, yet for some reason she couldn't keep her tail from brushing the ground every time she moved. "Keep your tail erect," Woodlash ordered, and Redpaw sighed, trying again yet not quite managing.

"I can't!" Redpaw yowled, surprising herself by the loudness of her voice. If she hadn't already alarmed the mice in the area that she was there, she certainly did now. Woodlash blinked at her, a frown on his face.

"You're stressed out, aren't you?" he asked, and before she could reply, he added, "That's perfectly understandable. The death of a sibling is a very harsh thing for a cat as young as yourself to have to go through. Do you want to go back to camp and calm yourself down? That may help," he meowed, and Redpaw shook her head.

"No, I can ... I can do it," the red-furred she-cat sighed, whiskers twitching as she got back into position. Her tail tip still seemed to brush the ground, but it didn't touch the ground enough for it to cause leaves to rustle every time she moved.

"It's a good thing that you're determined to do this, Redpaw," Woodlash stated. "I think you've perfected the hunting crouch as much as you can. The steps that come after the initial crouching is the stalking, and then, well, you pounce," he meowed, before looking forward -- a bush rustled in the distance, and Redpaw sniffed, scenting squirrel. "Here, I'll set an example," he meowed, before crouching down. He slowly stalked forward, being careful to weave his way out of the path of stray ferns and leaves. When he got close enough to the bush, he pounced, leaping into the air and coming down with all of his weight onto a squirrel. His jaws met the creature's neck, and he ended it's life quickly, before bringing his catch back over to Redpaw. "Do you think you can do that?" he asked.

"I suppose," she responded, although she was not quite sure herself.

"Brilliant," Woodlash said. Redpaw sniffed the air, but she only caught the lingering scent of a now-dead squirrel. She padded over to The Rocks, sniffing around until she caught a whiff of live vole. Her eyes darted around as she finally spotted the creature, resting with it's eyes closed underneath the shade of a rock. She moved forward, slowly, and hopefully with all the grace of a cheetah. *'I've got you now!'* she thought, determined, as she pounced -- and landed on nothing. The vole that had been supposed to be underneath her had made it's clever escape into the undergrowth.

"Good try!" Woodlash called, and Redpaw sighed, disappointed in herself. She felt ashamed to have to walk back over to her mentor empty-pawed, although she knew it was irrational to think that way. Hardly any apprentice ever managed to catch a piece of prey on their first try; she doubted that even Foxfur had been able to, and he was perhaps the best hunter in MapleClan. Woodlash seemed to sense the fact that she was troubled, so he said, "Don't fret over a piece of prey. Not everyone can catch everything all of the time," he pointed out.

Redpaw nodded in agreement. "I guess you're right," she meowed.

"Of course I am," Woodlash said. "Now, come. I think that may complete your training for the day," he purred, and they walked back towards camp, Woodlash with a dead squirrel in his jaws and Redpaw with nothing.

As they returned to camp, Woodlash made an immediate beeline towards the fresh-kill pile, dropping his catch amongst the other dead critters in the pile and then padding over towards Sunflare. Redpaw smirked upon seeing this, knowing that they were mates and had been for a very long time.

Redpaw heard pawsteps coming towards her, and she turned her head to see Cricketpaw. "You just got back from training, didn't you? Didn't you manage to catch anything?" the she-cat asked, and Redpaw flattened her ears to her head, suddenly feeling defensive.

"No, but it was my first training session since being made an apprentice!" she pointed out, and Cricketpaw's eyes widened as she reeled back.

"Oh, right -- I'm sorry, I forgot!" she meowed, and Redpaw sighed, sitting down and curling her tail around her paws.

"No, it's alright. I shouldn't have yelled at you like that, sorry," she apologized, and Cricketpaw shook her head, lying down next to her.

"It's fine. I guess I shouldn't automatically assume that everyone can catch something on their first hunt," she said, and Redpaw silently agreed with her words. She looked up as she spotted Loststar leaping onto the Highrock.

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey, please gather beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting!" she yowled, and Redpaw stood, trotting over to sit underneath the Highrock. Cricketpaw, Mousepaw, and Mosspaw soon joined her. "As you all know, tonight is the night of the full moon! That means I will gather my best warriors and apprentices and have them join me at the Gathering tonight," she said.

Redpaw's tail lashed, anxious to see who would be going to the Gathering. For a few moments, she decided to allow her thoughts to drift away from the prospect of Frostpaw, and onto the idea of something new.

"The cats I have decided to take with me to the Gathering tonight are Skyhawk, Firehawk, Pebblefall, Bearjaws, Minnowcreek, Milkdrop, Cherryflower, Foxfur, Badgerclaw, Rockfall, Newtheart, Silentpaw, Lightpaw, Redpaw, and Mosspaw!" she announced. Redpaw's eyes stretched wide as she heard she would be going, though Mousepaw stood stock still beside her.

"Oh! Isn't this exciting? Our first Gathering!" Mosspaw meowed, not caring if anyone heard her. Mousepaw, however, sunk her claws into the ground disappointedly.

"*Your* first Gathering," Mousepaw corrected her sister through gritted teeth. Redpaw felt bad for her -- she probably felt

inadequate now, in comparison to her siblings, even though she's the oldest one.

Mosspaw blinked, jerking her head around to stare at Mousepaw in surprise. "What do you mean?" she asked, and Redpaw concluded that she had not been paying much attention during the meeting.

"*Your* first Gathering," Mousepaw repeated, or practically spat out, her voice louder this time. "... I didn't get invited," she added after multiple moments of silence, before padding away with her tail drooping. Redpaw frowned.

"Meeting dismissed," Loststar called, jumping from the Highrock and going down to talk to her best friend and fellow warrior, Pebblefall.

Redpaw soon grew worried that Mousepaw would do something stupid in an attempt to prove herself worthy of at least going to a Gathering, but her worries all faded away as she noticed that dusk was coming, and soon it would be time for her very first Gathering!

Chapter Five

As the sun began to fall even lower in the sky, the cats who were going to the Gathering decided that they might as well get going now. The Lone Tree, a large tree in the middle of a barren clearing, was quite a distance away, and not one Clan wanted to be the last one to arrive to the Gathering. In this forest, it was considered a bit dishonorable. Before they left, though, Redpaw wanted to say goodbye to Mousepaw. She felt bad knowing that she could go to the Gathering even though she had been knocked out for the first three days of her apprenticeship, and had only just began training. Mousepaw, though, had been training for the entire duration of her apprenticeship, and was probably more skilled than Redpaw herself was at the moment.

The red-furred apprentice padded into the apprentice's den with a small shrew. Leaf-bare was about to come, so whatever prey that they actually could find was quite skinny. And Redpaw knew that this leaf-bare would be hard, especially with a cat like Breezeflame on the loose, even though she didn't know much about the she-cat except for what Skyhawk had told the Clan. She supposed that she could always ask Woodlash about it, but it would probably be a touchy subject for him, considering she had been the cat to leave him permanently marred.

"Mousepaw?" she said, looking around the dark den, waiting until her eyes adjusted. When she could finally see, she took note of Mousepaw in the far left corner of the den, her moss nest situated next to her friend Cricketpaw's. She looked to be asleep, with her tail curled over her nose, but Redpaw could tell by the way she was breathing that she was awake. Not to mention the fact that her eyes flashed open whenever Redpaw said her name.

She padded over, depositing the shrew at her sister's paws. "I'm sorry you don't get to go to the Gathering. It's not fair. I was knocked out for almost all of my apprenticeship so far," she pointed out, and Mousepaw unfolded her tail, pulling it away from her face.

She reached forwards with her head, taking a few careful bites of the shrew before taking the time to respond.

"No, it's -- it's alright. You deserve to go more than I do," she stated with a nod, and when Redpaw's face clouded over with confusion, she quickly clarified, "I mean, you jumped into a pond to save your brother, even though you *knew* that you couldn't swim, and knocked yourself out for three days. It's not your fault that you haven't been able to train -- *you would've been your brother's hero had it not been for the hypothermia.* You've already done more than I could ever do, Redpaw. It's only fair that you should be able to go instead of I," she mewed.

Redpaw's eyes glittered with unshed tears, and she swallowed past a lump in her throat, and she wondered how Mousepaw got to be so wise. She nodded her head, her gaze traveling to her paws. "Thank you," she whispered, voice wavering slightly. She didn't want to think about Frostpaw. *'Maybe if I had gotten him out of the water sooner, the hypothermia would've have been powerful enough to kill him,'* she thought glumly, although she knew she shouldn't spend her time dwelling on it.

"Redpaw!" a cat shouted from outside of the den, and Redpaw looked over her shoulder to see Mosspaw. "Are you coming, or what? You know we can't wait all night," Mosspaw said. Redpaw's ears twitched.

"Of course I'm coming," she answered, then offered Mousepaw a weak smile. "Again, I'm sorry you couldn't come. You deserve to," she mewed, and Mousepaw smiled back at her.

"Yeah, well, you two just ... go have fun, I guess. It's not your fault I wasn't chosen," Mousepaw sighed, resting her head back down upon her paws. Redpaw nodded regretfully, then bounded out of the den towards the waiting Mosspaw. She lashed her tail, and they began following the rest of the cats allowed to go to the Gathering.

Redpaw has, of course, never seen The Lone Tree, although she has heard stories about it. She's heard stories that it was one of the largest trees in the entire forest, and that it's gnarled branches reached far enough out into the clearing to shelter all of the Clans

from the frigid night air as they huddled together to watch the Gathering. She knew that it was a very sacred place, and that if even one cat dared to *try* to break the truce, then clouds would be sent to cover the moon and the Clans would, most likely, be forced to return home, thus ending the Gathering early. Redpaw hoped that wouldn't happen this time around.

Redpaw and Mosspaw both walked quietly together. She took note of how Skyhawk and Honeysuckle were whispering to each other, as if they didn't want anyone else to be hearing what they were saying. Redpaw couldn't help but to quickly become suspicious of the two; what if they were something more than friends? It wouldn't be the first time a medicine cat became mates with someone, she knew. For some reason, forbidden relationships were starting to become more and more become, between both medicine cats and cats of opposing Clans.

"Hey, Mosspaw," she said, and Mosspaw glanced at her. "Do you think that Skyhawk and Honeysuckle are something more than friends?" she asked, making sure her voice was low so that Skyhawk couldn't hear her. When Mosspaw looked puzzled, she added, "I mean, look at them; their flanks are almost touching," she pointed out, and realization dawned on Mosspaw's face.

"I'm not sure," Mosspaw murmured. "Personally, I think if anyone knew what was up with Skyhawk, it would be Lightpaw. She would probably know whether her mentor had a secret mate or not. After all, they *do* share the same den," she pointed out slowly, and Redpaw nodded in agreement.

"You're probably right," she said. "Hey, Lightpaw!" she shouted, ignoring the looks that some of the other cats shot at her.

"Stop being so loud, Redpaw," Minnowcreek, an elderly she-cat, scolded from behind her. Redpaw flashed an apologetic look over her shoulder to the former queen before looking at Lightpaw, who had bounced over to the two apprentices as soon as Redpaw called her name.

"What is it?" the medicine cat apprentice asked, curious.

"Well, we were wondering something ... you know Skyhawk and Honeysuckle?" Redpaw asked, and Lightpaw nodded, blinking her two heterochromatic eyes several times. "Yeah, are they -- like, are they a thing?" she asked, feeling awkward asking a cat about another cat's personal life, when suddenly, Lightpaw stiffened. She flattened her ears against her head, casting a glance towards her mentor warily. "Well?" Redpaw prompted impatiently when the she-cat didn't answer.

Lightpaw opened her mouth to respond, but another voice cut off her futile attempt at speaking. "What's this about Skyhawk and Honeysuckle?" the voice, that obviously belonged to a tom, questioned with suspicion laced in his voice. Redpaw swiveled her head around, glaring at the newcomer. It was Bearjaws, of course -- the annoying warrior, always poking his head in everyone business, even if it didn't involve him.

"None of your business, Bearjaws!" Mosspaw snapped, and Bearjaws reeled back. The massive tom was clearly surprised that someone would even dare to mouth off to him. His fur bristled slightly, but he remained cool. Eventually, he just turned around and stalked off to where Badgerclaw and Foxfur were at.

"Nice one, Mosspaw!" Redpaw meowed, and Mosspaw smiled at her. Then Redpaw turned to Lightpaw, who had suddenly turned as quiet as a mouse. Or as quiet as Silentpaw, really. She never spoke, but she wasn't a mute. She just never felt like speaking; instead, she gestured to things, and she either shook or nodded her head when someone asked her something. Because of this, Silentpaw didn't have many friends, and Redpaw felt a bit bad for her. She did, however, have a very caring mentor; Cherryflower, one of the older warriors, and Loststar's mother. She was also Bearjaws, Wolftail's, Badgerclaw's, and Foxfur's mother, but they were from a different litter. Whiteclaw was from one of her other litters as well, her first one. "Anyways, Lightpaw?" she asked.

Lightpaw sighed, shuffling her paws and glancing down as they walked. Redpaw could almost spot the huge tree in the distance, but knew that the Clan would still have a little while longer to go until they actually got there. Finally, Lightpaw looked up at them, her two-colored eyes as wide as the moon. "Skyhawk told me not to

tell you. He said I'd be breaking a promise if I did -- but I-I ... if I tell you, you two won't tell anyone, right?" she questioned quietly, lowering her voice so low that only Mosspaw and Redpaw were capable of hearing her words, despite the entire Clan being packed so tightly together while they traveled to The Lone Tree.

"I promise," Redpaw said.

Mosspaw nodded her agreement. "So do I," she purred.

Lightpaw sighed, taking a deep breath. "Fine. I ... yes, Skyhawk is mates with Honeysuckle. They have a ... they have a long history together. If you ask him, he would probably tell you. Or he would tell Redpaw, at least -- he seems to trust you, Redpaw," Lightpaw mewed.

Redpaw flicked her tail in wonder. Had anyone else noticed how close Skyhawk and Honeysuckle seemed to be before they did, except for Lightpaw? After a moment of silence, Lightpaw quickly added onto her previous statement, "But please, don't tell him that I was the one to tell you, if you do ask him! Just tell him that you saw him and Honeysuckle together. That was how I first came to know about them," she said. Redpaw nodded her understanding. Skyhawk would probably feel betrayed if he knew that Lightpaw had, apparently, broken a promise to him and told one of his secrets ... a secret that could very well force him to lose his position as a medicine cat.

"I think Bearjaws might've heard us," Mosspaw suddenly whispered, and Redpaw looked up, alarmed. Indeed, because she now saw the massive brown tom glaring what looked to be thorns into Skyhawk's and Honeysuckle's side. However, the three cats did not have any time to ponder on this, because soon they arrived at the Gathering. WolfClan and MeadowClan were already in the clearing, yet CloudClan were yet to come. That was good luck for MapleClan; it meant that they weren't the last ones there, although with them being second to last, they might as well be.

"MapleClan has arrived!" Loststar announced loudly, before flicking her tail and allowing all of MapleClan to surge into the clearing. She, however, padded over to the base of The Lone Tree, and with

one long, powerful leap, she landed on one of the lower branches. Steadily, she crawled to the end of the thick branch. It was obviously heavy enough to hold her weight. The other two leaders, Icestar and Redstar, were seated upon the ends of the other branches. They both appeared to be having an avid conversation with one another, paying no attention to MapleClan as they entered the clearing. Redpaw couldn't help but to find that as being rather rude, but she decided not to say anything about it.

Skyhawk immediately parted ways with Honeysuckle, licking the creamy-ginger she-cat's shoulder so quickly that Redpaw doubted anyone would've saw it unless they had been really looking. He padded over to the where the other medicine cats were at, and plopped down next to a dark-colored she-cat, whom Redpaw assumed was Nightfrost, the MeadowClan medicine cat. Skyhawk had mentioned her in his story about what he had learned during his exile. Another she-cat, whom looked to be rather pretty, appeared to be trying to flirt with Skyhawk. He, however, ignored her, and Redpaw figured that he was used to her antics. This only made the she-cat more desperate and frustrated in her attempts. Finally, she gave up, and started talking to Gingerfur, the medicine cat. Redpaw assumed that the flirtatious she-cat was Blossompaw, the medicine cat apprentice. She was too old to really be an apprentice, but also too immature to gain her full medicine cat name, according to what Redpaw had heard about her.

Honeysuckle laid down next to Milkdrop, and Redpaw suddenly remembered that Milkdrop was her father. She had been deeply saddened when her father came back earless, and she always offered to help take care of him whenever she could. When he had first returned to camp in such a condition, she had been the one to bring him prey while he was recovering in the medicine cat's den. She had also been the one to replace the cobwebs and rub marigold on the places where his ears used to be, every morning and night, until they scarred over. Most cats had found the job repulsive, but Honeysuckle had offered to do it without hesitation, all out of love and concern for her father. She also spends a lot of time in the elder's den now with her father, because she knows that he feels isolated having to be stuck in a den with two old cats even though he's still young enough to be a warrior. He is only slightly older

than Loststar and the same age as Rockfall, and neither of them are what one would consider old.

Firehawk sat down at the base of the tree, where the deputies of each Clan always sat. He, Spruceleaf, and Dawnshade all appeared to be having a conversation, albeit a very quiet, slow-going one. Dawnshade, for one, seemed more focused on watching over MeadowClan than having a talk with any of them, and to Redpaw, it looked like the only reason she even bothered to reply was because she didn't want to be seen as impolite, and Redpaw couldn't blame her for that. Even to her, manners were important, since it seemed like a lot of cats these days had a lack thereof.

Redpaw spotted two WolfClan apprentices wrestling. The smaller apprentice seemed to be winning, somehow overpowering the bigger one. She got up from where she sat next to Mosspaw, as Lightpaw had left them to gather with the other medicine cats. "Mosspaw?" she asked, looking down at her sister, who seemed to be lost in thought as she gazed at the sky.

"Hmmm?" Mosspaw asked, blinking several time as she tore her gaze away from the stars. "Redpaw, can I show you something ... ?" she asked, but didn't wait for Redpaw to answer. "Look up at Silverpelt, and tell me ... don't you see that a new warrior has joined their ranks tonight?" she asked, and Redpaw could hear the smile in her voice before she could see it. She turned her head to Silverpelt, and suddenly, she saw it, too. A new star shone in the darkness tonight. For now, this star was the brightest of them all.

"Frostpaw," Redpaw whispered, forgetting all about the two WolfClan apprentices. She sighed, feeling happy for her brother now that she knew he had made a safe journey to StarClan, his new home in the stars. *'I'll be with you one day, brother,'* she promised in her thoughts. As she thought these words, she felt a comforting presence press itself against her side, and then disappear. She blinked in astonishment, but said nothing, as she knew that it had probably been Frostpaw, or perhaps some other StarClan warrior.

As Redpaw got over this feeling, she heard a loud screech from not too far away. "CloudClan has made it to the Gathering!" the voice was the raspy voice of Duststar, the elderly CloudClan leader.

Redpaw had heard a few stories about this tom, and she knew that he did not have many more lives left, and that he was even considering retirement.

"Finally," Mosspaw breathed from beside her sister, and Redpaw chuckled, watching as the CloudClan cats surged into the clearing. She, for a split second, wondered if she should suggest to Loststar a raid on them, since Duststar was growing old and weak. Then, she remembered that it had been CloudClan cats who saved her life and brought her back to her camp when they could have left her there, cold and dying of hypothermia, on the shore of the pond. Yet, they didn't, and for that Redpaw knew that she would have to respect them, because she doubted that she could ever pay them back, even if they were too late to save Frostpaw. He had been on the brink of death the entire time, anyways ..

Redpaw was snapped out of her thoughts as one of the CloudClan apprentices padded over to her. He was a tall, handsome, long-haired tom with brown tabby fur, a black tail, and green eyes that had just a hint of brown in the center. Despite this, he was only an apprentice, from what Redpaw could tell. Mosspaw gasped from beside her, and Redpaw all of a sudden noticed the dreamy look on her sister's face. It was clear to Redpaw that Mosspw had fallen in love, and she almost snickered, but instead returned her eyes back to what they were originally doing; gazing at the CloudClan cat in front of her.

"Hi," the brown tabby purred, lying down next to Redpaw. "I'm Tigerpaw," he introduced himself, and Redpaw felt a jolt of realization flash through her. This was the exact same apprentice that had been apart of the patrol that saved her! Skyhawk had said that the three cats on the patrol were Runestone, Jayfrost, and her apprentice, Tigerpaw.

The red-furred she-cat's eyes widened in sudden realization. "I-I ... " she stuttered in shock, hardly knowing what to say. "You ... you were one of the cats that saved me! I remember you ... just, thank you! And tell ... tell Runestone and Jayfrost that, too! I'll never be able to repay you for what you did," she stammered, the tips of her ears glowing bright red from embarrassment underneath her fur.

Tigerpaw let out a bark of laughter. "It was no problem!" he meowed. "I'd never turn down the chance to help someone, whether they were from an enemy Clan or not," he said, his voice as warm as honey. Redpaw looked at her sister, and she seemed to melt right then and there.

Mosspaw leaned over, whispering in Redpaw's ear, "Why can't any of the toms in MapleClan be as handsome as he is?" Redpaw almost choked on her laughter, and as Tigerpaw noticed this, his once content expression dropped immediately, replaced by a serious frown. His tail lashed back and forth behind him.

"What's wrong?" the hazel-eyed tom asked.

"Nothing," Redpaw said quickly, not wanting to tell him that she figured her sister Mosspaw probably had a crush on him. That would hurt Mosspaw's feeling for her to just so blatantly blurt that out to him for sure, and she could never do that to her, or any of her sisters, really. Tigerpaw opened his mouth to reply, but he was suddenly cut off by Mosspaw.

"Hush! Look -- the Gathering's about to start!" Mosspaw pointed out, and the three apprentices immediately quieted down, as did all of the other cats in the clearing below The Lone Tree, as all four leaders stood up at the end of their designated tree branches, balancing on them perfectly, for if they did not, they would sure have a nasty fall and quite a few wounds on their paws to deal with later.

"Let the Gathering begin!" Loststar yowled, lifting her head towards the moon so that she almost resembled a wolf. Loststar took a step back, and she lowered her head, glancing towards the side at the other leaders on the tree. "Redstar, you may begin," she said, and the red-furred she-cat nodded, stepping forward briskly.

"MeadowClan has been well this past couple of moons," she announced. "However, prey is starting to become more scarce than it ever has been, even in other leaf-bares. We are lucky if we even have up to five pieces of prey on our fresh-kill pile at any given time," she frowned. "Our warriors and apprentices are growing hungry, because all of the food we have been giving to the elders,

queens, and kits before we even start to think about feeding ourselves. Even this, though, is not enough. Recently, one of our kits, Shrewkit, passed away because his mother was unable to produce enough milk, due to her hardly being able to feed herself. We are still in mourning -- we are very sad at having to have lost such a young, promising life," Redstar said, bowing her head.

Redpaw bowed her head as well, feeling sad for the kit, but even worse for his mother, who probably felt as if it was her fault Shrewkit had died, even though it wasn't. She figured that Redstar was finished, but then the leader added, "Would any of you be so generous as to offer us some help? Please ... we are starving; you can see some of our warrior's ribs, and it's not even leaf-bare yet!" she said.

"What? Redstar never begs for anything," Tigerpaw murmured to himself, and Redpaw glanced over at him, wondering what he meant. "I've been to a couple of other Gatherings before, and in all the rest of them, I had only known her to be egoistic and aggressive. MeadowClan must be having a really tough time if Redstar is willing to stoop so low as to beg," he clarified as he noticed Redpaw's puzzled expression that she had sent his way.

Redpaw nodded before turning her attention back to what was currently taking place. Redstar appeared hopeful, yet also ashamed of herself for having to stoop so low, as Tigerpaw had put it, as to beg another Clan for their help, even if that was one of the purposes of a Gathering; to ask for another Clan's help, if it was deemed necessary and the situation was too dire for one Clan to face all by themselves. The other three leaders glanced at each other warily, and then Icestar began to speak, slowly.

"Redstar," Icestar began, "We will see what we can do to help. Our prey is also scarce -- in the forest, that is. However, the fish is still plentiful in our river, so I suppose I will give you permission to use our river for fishing ... but! You can only hunt in the river once per day, because we need those fish, too. If my patrols catch you fishing at the river more than one time in a day, the alliance will be broken, and my warriors will be free to attack yours is they even step paw near the river. Do you understand?" she asked, and Redstar nodded, appearing to be relieved.

"Thank you, Icestar. You have no idea how much this means to my Clan and I," she says. Icestar nods, but says nothing in response.

"That alliance isn't going to ask any longer than a moon, if even that long," Tigerpaw commented quietly, and for a moment Redpaw wondered if he was always this talkative. He seemed to enjoy making comments on what the leaders said during Gatherings; as a matter of fact, from what Redpaw knew about him so far, it was probably one of his quirks. She wouldn't be surprised if he had quite a few more; Tigerpaw, in Redpaw's opinion, seemed to be one of those cats that had a heart of pure gold, much like Frostpaw himself did before he happened to pass away. Those kinds of cats were hard to come by in desolate times like these, and Redpaw automatically knew, right then and there, that she had found herself a friend in Tigerpaw. After all, he had been the one to save her, and offer Frostpaw three extra days of life, even if he didn't know that he had passed away yet.

"What do you mean by that?" Redpaw asked him curiously.

"Redstar almost always has something else in mind when she asks for help from someone," Tigerpaw whispers, probably because there were quite a few MeadowClan warriors nearby. Redpaw couldn't help but to be dubious about his statement as she studied the MeadowClan warriors. Some of their ribs really were visible against their sides, and that told Redpaw that Redstar actually had been telling the truth about her needing help.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Redpaw said. "You really can see some of their ribs ... " she mused.

"I know, but one time, when CloudClan helped MeadowClan to defend off badgers that were attacking their camp, they raided us as soon as they were completely recovered from it," Tigerpaw pointed out, and Redpaw was shocked. She couldn't imagine anyone doing that, but she knew that Redstar wasn't a bad cat ... she was just very aggressive, and created some unnecessary violence every once in awhile. Really, though, Redpaw knew that Redstar honestly just wanted what was best for MeadowClan, and no one could blame her for wanting that -- after all, that's what every leader wants for their Clan.

"Can you two be quiet?!" a large CloudClan she-cat hissed from where she was standing beside them. Tigerpaw flinched at her reprimand, flattening his ears against his head.

"Sorry, Ivystorm," Tigerpaw apologized. Ivystorm -- Redpaw was quite sure that she had heard Skyhawk mention that name before, and she figured that they knew each other somehow.

"Are you friends with Skyhawk?" she blurted out suddenly, and then slapped her tail over her mouth. This exact same she-cat had just told the two of them to be quiet, for StarClan's sake, and here she is blurting out questions like a mad cat! Redpaw felt silly. "Sorry," she whispered.

Ivystorm stiffened, and then seemed to relax a bit as Skyhawk was mentioned, as if she and him were really good friends. "Yes, I'm friends with Skyhawk," she responded coolly. "However, I would prefer not to talk about how we came to know each other." she said, and Redpaw nodded in understanding, knowing by now that some things were better left unsaid. "Now, be quiet, and listen to the Gathering," she ordered, despite the fact that personally, Redpaw did not feel that she could boss around an apprentice from another Clan, she obeyed her anyways.

Icestar dipped her head to Redstar, and then began to speak of how her Clan has been going. "WolfClan has been doing great, actually, save for the scarcity of the prey in the forest. The only prey that we have been able to find are strangely near the border of CloudClan. They have accused my warriors of stealing from their territory, even though I solemnly swear by StarClan that we have not been. And if my warriors have been stealing, then I know nothing about it,' she said, her gaze suddenly hardening.

Tigerpaw let out a light hiss from beside Redpaw. "She has, too, been stealing -- WolfClan is a bunch of prey-stealers," he murmured under his breath, his voice barely audible. Ivystorm, this time, luckily did not hear him. Redpaw lashed her tail but said nothing in response.

Icestar continued, "One of our warriors, Finchflight, has recently moved to the elder's den. We are hoping to offer him many, many

moons of rest," she said. "One of our queens, Ravencry, has recently given birth to a litter of two -- her kits have been named Dawnkit and Fawnkit," she announced, before sitting back down on the branch, curling her tail around her white paws. "That is all. Loststar? I suppose you may begin, if you want," she meowed, and Loststar dipped her head in respect before speaking.

"MapleClan, unfortunately, has not been doing so well recently. An apprentice, Frostpaw, has recently passed away of hypothermia. He is with StarClan now, but we still mourn," she said, a hint of sadness in her voice. "One of our warriors, Fernshade, has also passed away recently, from rogues. And a warrior of ours, Milkdrop, has been forced to retire to the elder's den early because of these same rogues. Those rogues, they - they cut his ears off," she said, and multiple cats gasped, faces a combination of horror and surprise.Redpaw glanced at Milkdrop, who couldn't hear what Loststar was saying, but seemed to have a clear idea of it.

Then Loststar added, "But we also have good news! We have three new apprentices; Mousepaw, Mosspaw, and Redpaw!" she said. "Frostpaw's name would have also been amongst these three cat's, had he not been called to hunt with StarClan so early," she stated, bowing her head. Cats in the clearing bowed their heads as well, obviously in mourning of Frostpaw.

"Duststar," Loststar meowed. "You may begin," she said. Duststar nodded, clearing his throat, and it was then that Redpaw noticed that it was close to dawn already, but not quite. Duststar would have to be quick with whatever he wanted to say.

"CloudClan's prey has, for some reason, been quite abundant," Duststar meowed. "But, I have to admit, the fresh-kill pile is gradually weakening. When leaf-bare actually comes, I am sure that the prey will be more scarce than it is now." he said. "A patrol that I was leading recently has caught the scent of rogues on our territory, and not just one rogue, but many -- perhaps a whole group of them. The scent was not stale, either. I would suggest watching out for these rogues," he meowed. "I suspect that they have been stealing prey from our territory, or worse, planning something," he said. Redpaw's whiskers twitched in alarm. What if these were the same rogues that permanently marred Milkdrop, and murdered

Fernshade, all in cold-blood?

"That is all I have to say," Duststar meowed after a few moments of silence. "Not a lot has been going on in CloudClan recently, save for the rogues, and for that I am thankful," he meowed, flicking his tail before leaping off the branch he was situated on, landing perfectly on his paws. "This Gathering is over!" he called, and the other three leaders leaped off of their own designated branches in order.

Redpaw got up, along with Mosspaw and Tigerpaw. "It was nice meeting you," Tigerpaw purred, his whiskers twitching.

"Yeah, it ... it was nice meeting you, too," Redpaw meowed, lashing her tail. "I'm going to go over to Loststar now ... this was really fun, though. I want to talk to you again one day," she said.

Tigerpaw nodded his head in understanding. "Me, too," he mewed. "Bye." he said. Redpaw dipped her head and then turned, walking over to where Loststar was standing with her tail erect in the air, obviously signaling for her Clan to gather with her so that they could leave. Mosspaw followed right behind her.

"Wasn't Tigerpaw so *handsome?* Really, though, why can't some of the toms in our Clan be like that?" she wondered aloud. Redpaw rolled her eyes, finding her sister's antics to be quite amusing.

"Oh, shut it, Mosspaw -- don't compliment him. He's from a totally different Clan," she pointed out as they made it to where Loststar was standing. Mosspaw shrugged her shoulders, breathing out a sigh.

"I know that, but he's just so ... so ... " Mosspaw trailed off, struggling to find the right word to describe exactly what she thought of him.

"Dreamy?" a random voice suddenly filled in for Mosspaw, and Redpaw whirled around, before noticing that it was just Lightpaw. Mosspaw's eyes clouded over with surprise as she gazed at Skyhawk's apprentice.

"What? You like him, too?" Mosspaw asked.

Lightpaw snorted lightly. "No. I'm not like my mentor -- but obviously, *you* have a crush on him!" she exclaimed. Mosspaw's eyes widened at the accusation. Redpaw figured that she would probably be bright red right now if she didn't have fur.

"I do not," Mosspaw claimed, fluffing up her ginger fur.

"Oh, really? Then why are you swooning over him and how handsome he is?" Lightpaw teased.

"Just because I think someone is good-looking doesn't mean I have a crush on them!" Mosspaw said, her voice rising slightly in volume. Lightpaw took a step back, her whiskers twitching in warning.

"Alright, alright -- I get it. I know that you can think someone looks good without having a crush on them. I was just teasing you," Lightpaw said. Mosspaw's pelt gradually started to flatten back down to it's original size as her temper went down.

"I know. Sorry for yelling at you," Mosspaw apologized, giving her fur a couple of quick licks.

"It's fine," Lightpaw said. Redpaw zoned out of the rest of their conversation. She looked up at the sky, taking note of how the sun was beginning to rise by now. One could just barely see it above the horizon. "Hey, Redpaw!" Lightpaw shouted, and Redpaw soon snapped out of it. She looked over at her to see that she was literally fox-lengths ahead of her by now. "Are you coming or what? Loststar has already started moving," she pointed out.

Redpaw's eyes widened. Had she really zoned out of it so badly that she didn't notice the entire Clan had began to move? "Yeah, sorry!" she exclaimed, rushing forward to catch up with them.

When they finally reached the territory, Redpaw smelt something funny. She knew automatically that whatever it was she was smelling, it certainly didn't belong on MapleClan territory. "Hey, Mosspaw," she meowed. "Do you ... do you smell that?" she asked, suddenly becoming very, very worried about what might be

happening in camp.

Mosspaw blinked, lifting her nose and sniffing the air multiple times. "I smell ... rogues." she said, voice suddenly taking on a worried tone. Lightpaw looked at them both strangely, then scented the air as well. Her eyes widened.

"Not just rogues ... " Lightpaw whispered. "I smell *blood."*

Chapter Six

The camp was abandoned, and not to mention absolutely *devastated.* There was blood littering the walls of the dens, and how blood managed to get up there, Redpaw didn't really know. Horrified, she padded into the apprentice's den to search for Mousepaw, only to find that she wasn't there. "Mosspaw!" she called, and almost immediately afterwards, she heard some shuffling of the moss behind her.

"Right behind you," Mosspaw meowed, her voice struck with terror. Redpaw turned around, looking out of the entrance of the den. She caught a glimpse of Loststar carefully searching camp, before stopping near the elder's den. Curious, she padded out of the apprentice's den, but only to see that the reason Loststar had stopped was because there lie the dead body of the queen Snowfall. Redpaw's eyes widened, and she rushed over. There was a clean cut from the beginning of her jaw, all the way down to her flank. The end of the cut almost reached her tail.

Darkscratch was crouched nearby. "She died protecting the elder's den," the ragged, black-furred tom meowed, before breaking into a fit of coughing. When he was finished, he sat down behind the queen's body, clearly intent on honoring her with all that he had left. Redpaw was glad to see that the elder was unharmed, but devastated about Snowfall's death. Did all of the good cats have to die? Is that what StarClan wanted?

Redpaw, suddenly, remembered the dream she had a couple of nights ago. The maple tree burning to the ground until it was left as nothing more than a little, charred stump. *'Does that ... does that mean MapleClan is going to be destroyed?'* she asked herself, her eyes widening.

Loststar buried her nose into the small portion of Snowfall's body that wasn't harmed or bloody. "You have died an honorable death, Snowfall, one fit for all of my warriors -- protecting your fellow Clanmates from harm," she whispered into the white she-cat's fur.

"There is nothing more I get to ask from my Clan." she said, before lifting her head up to gaze at Darkscratch. "I can't help but wonder why she would do this, though ... she has kits," she pointed out. "And we have no other queens to take care of them .. "

"Well, I'm going to go look for the other cats," Redpaw offered, and Loststar nodded, flicking her tail as if signaling for her to go. Redpaw turned, padding away with Mosspaw trailing behind her. As she walked out of camp, she stopped by a large tree to sniff the air for their scents. Surprisingly, she noticed that they were very close. As she was about to walk forward, a voice stopped her.

"Psst! Up here!" a she-cat hissed, and Redpaw whirled around to face the tree trunk, only to find nothing. "I said up, you mouse-brain!" Redpaw looked up to see Mudpaw leering at her from one of the lower branches of the tree. Even though she was bleeding from multiple places on her body, she still somehow managed to be as rude as ever.

"Why are you up there?" Mosspaw asked. Redpaw noticed Mousepaw sitting next to Mudpaw on the branch, and she was immediately hit by an almost overwhelming sense of relief for her sister. She, after all, didn't know what she would do if she was left with only Mosspaw as a sibling. Frostpaw's death had been painful enough; she didn't want to have to go through another ordeal like that again.

Mudpaw snorted, her claws scraping the tree branch. "Why do you think?! We had to get away from those fox-hearted rogues somehow ... " she said, before leaping from the tree and landing on her paws beside Redpaw. Redpaw scanned the other branches extending from the large maple tree, and she found that Cricketpaw was sharing the same branch as Mousepaw and Mudpaw.

"Are Snowfall's kits up there, too?" Redpaw asked, worried about them, as she hadn't seen them anywhere in camp. Mousepaw jumped down from the branch she had been sitting on, a guilty expression on her face. She shuffled her paws, quiet, and Redpaw soon got impatient. "Well?" she prompted. If Mousepaw was feeling guilty about something, then it obviously wasn't a good sign, not for her or for anyone else in MapleClan ...

"About that ..." Mousepaw trailed off, looking away from Redpaw's eyes and faking a cough. Cricketpaw jumped, landing next to the brown and white she-cat. "I'd rescued them and carried them out of camp, but when I was climbing up the tree, I accidentally dropped them," she murmured, her voice so quiet that Redpaw could barely make out what she was saying.

"What? Repeat that. I don't believe I heard you clearly .. " Redpaw said, hoping that what she had thought Mousepaw said wasn't what she actually said. Her sister wasn't mouse-brain enough to actually drop a couple of kits when there were rogues around -- accident or not -- was she?

"I said, when I was climbing up the tree, I accidentally dropped them. And the -- the rogues ... the rogues captured them before I could get back to them," she halfway repeated, her voice louder and stronger this time whenever she spoke. Redpaw's eyes widened. '*Great. Dropping them is bad enough, but letting them get taken away by a couple of rogues? Nice move, Mousepaw.'* she thought angrily.

"Are you serious?" Redpaw yowled, causing Mousepaw and Mosspaw both to take a step away from their frustrated sister. "How could you possibly allow something as terrible as that to happen to those kits! You can't get any more mouse-brained than that ... " she hissed, narrowing her amber orbs.

"I-I-I ... I didn't mean to!" Mousepaw sputtered. "It was an accident! I'd never let something like that happen to someone's kits if I could help it!" she pointed out. Redpaw rolled her eyes, not noticing that even Mudpaw had backed away from her by now, as if she was afraid of her and her anger.

"What a mouse-brain you are! You know, I really can see why Loststar decided not to invite you to the Gathering tonight ... you don't *deserve* to go!" she spat, flashing her teeth before turning and walking away, ignoring the betrayed look on Mousepaw's face. Redpaw pushed past the brambles and thorns that were in her path, thoroughly ignoring the lightly oozing cuts they left behind, as she continued her determined walk through MapleClan's territory. Soon enough, she heard the shuffling of leaves behind her, and as she turned to catch a glimpse of whatever was following her, she was

rather surprised to see that the cat behind her was not a rogue, nor was it a predator, but rather it was the medicine cat's apprentice.

"Where are you going?" Lightpaw asked, head tilted to the side and a childish curiosity evident in her voice. Redpaw wondered how, exactly, Lightpaw had known she was leaving. Last time she had checked, Lightpaw was in MapleClan camp along with the rest of the cats that had been invited to come to the Gathering, along with a few that weren't.

"I'm going out to rescue Snowfall's kits that Mousepaw had stupidly let fall from a tree," she responded. As confusion clouded Lightpaw's gaze, Redpaw sighed, deciding that she might as well clarify to the medicine cat apprentice exactly what she meant by that. "Mousepaw and the other cats that hadn't been invited to come to the Gathering had all climbed up a tree in order to escape the rogues. When Mousepaw had been climbing, she accidentally dropped Snowfall's kits which she had been carrying, and the rogues somehow managed to capture them before Mousepaw got the chance to react." she explained, and Lightpaw slowly nodded, her heterochromatic eyes stretched wide.

"But how do you know where to go?!" she exclaimed.

"Don't you remember from Skyhawk's story? He said that he had spotted a bunch of rogues near the ranch. That has to be where they are," Redpaw said, flicking her ear. "Don't you have something better to do than question me, anyways? I'm sure there's lots of cats back in the camp that may need tending to, y'know," she pointed out, and Lightpaw shook her head.

"No," she mewed. "Skyhawk has that all taken care of. Trust me, if he needed help, then I wouldn't be here right now. Besides, you don't really think you can manage to rescue a couple of kits from the grasp of deadly rogues without an extra set of paws, do you?" she said, her eyes gleaming in excitement at the prospect of going on an adventure to somewhere far, far off from MapleClan camp. And Redpaw had to admit, she was rather excited, too. The only other place she had been besides MapleClan territory was The Lone Tree, but it wasn't much of an exciting journey. She was about to respond to this, but Lightpaw cut her off, adding, "Don't you think

we should tell Loststar first? They would get worried and might send someone searching for us if we just decided to run off in the middle of the day, or think that we were captured by rogues, maybe," she meowed.

'Do you ever stop talking?' Redpaw thought, but didn't bother any to voice her thoughts to the sensitive she-cat in front of her. "No," Redpaw answered with a firm shake of her head. "I'd rather not. If we told Loststar, she most likely wouldn't allow us to go and would send some of her best warriors off to retrieve the kits instead," she pointed out. Lightpaw blinked, then sighed in defeat.

"I guess you're right," the she-cat meowed. "So what are we waiting for? Let's go!"

Almost the entire day had passed while they were journeying, and by now it was almost dusk. "We're so close to the ranch!" Lightpaw exclaimed, motioning with her tail towards the large twoleg nest and stables in the distance. Redpaw nodded, and with a start, she suddenly realized she hadn't eaten all day. She stopped, sniffing the air, and Lightpaw looked at her weirdly, as if she had just said something unbelievable. "What is it? What do you smell?" she asked.

"Nothing, I'm just smelling for some prey -- if you don't be quiet, though, you'll scare all of the prey away *and* let the rogues know that we're here," Redpaw retorted, and Lightpaw reeled back, slightly hurt by the harsh tone Redpaw's voice had picked up. She felt slightly guilty now, but didn't apologize. She was frustrated with everything today ...

The bushy tail of a squirrel was the only thing visible as it scurried under a bush. Redpaw immediately dropped into the hunter's crouch that Woodlash had taught her a couple of days ago, and then leaped, pouncing on the squirrel. She flipped the squirrel up from her paws and into her jaws before shaking her head rapidly until the squirrel's neck completely snapped. *'My first catch!'* Redpaw thought, astonished with herself. Lightpaw padded over to her. "Nice catch," Lightpaw commented as Redpaw leaned down to make

a meal out of the squirrel. In a few quick gulps, it was gone, and sure, Redpaw felt a little bit guilty now, since she hadn't asked Lightpaw if she wanted to share, but she decided not to dwell too much on it.

"Come on. We don't have much time -- there's no telling what the rogues are going to do with those kits ... if they haven't killed them already," she pointed out, noticing that Lightpaw winced as she spoke of the last part. It would be horrible if they had -- after all, they were only kits and had never done anything. Not to mention that so many cats had died already ... it just wouldn't be fair for the kits to have to join their mother in StarClan so early, before they even had the chance to do anything. Like Frostpaw ... *'No, Redpaw. Don't think about Frostpaw -- now's not the time. You've already gotten your chance to mourn, and you did ... for now, just focus on saving those kits,'* Redpaw thought to herself.

The ranch soon came into view, and with it, the sounds of cats talking. Redpaw crouched down low, intent on not making herself seen. As she looked to her left, she noticed that Lightpaw was rolling around in ... rabbit droppings? "Lightpaw!" she whispered, her voice close to a hiss. "What in Great StarClan do you think you're doing, rolling around in some rabbit's dirt! Come over here! We don't have time for silly things."

Lightpaw stood up, rolling her eyes. "Try it," she whispered back, and Redpaw noticed that she could no longer smell the she-cat, only see and hear her. "It disguises your scent. The rogues will think they're just smelling rabbit dirt when in reality, they're smelling *us,"* she pointed out, the sunset causing her odd eyes to twinkle. Redpaw blinked several times before trotting over to the rabbit dropping. After a few minutes of curiously sniffing, she reluctantly plopped down in it, and began rolling around like a dog. Her nose wrinkled in disgust as she realized she would be smelling like rabbit dirt for the next couple of days, but, she decided that she might as well just grin and bear it, because there was nothing else she could do about it.

Redpaw padded over to where she had been standing before and resumed her crouched position, as did Lightpaw from beside her. "Where do you think they're being kept?" she asked, and Redpaw

shrugged her shoulders. How could she be expected to know this stuff when she's never been outside of MapleClan territory except to go to The Lone Tree before?

"Dunno," Redpaw responded truthfully, eyeing the area in search of the kits. "They might be in one of the stables, or they might be .. " she trailed off as her eyes set on a large hole that had obviously been purposefully dug into the ground. " ... in that hole!" she said, and Lightpaw nodded in agreement. Carefully, making sure she remained as silent as possible, Redpaw started stalking forward, not wanting the rogues to see her. After glancing from side to side a few times, and spotting no one nearby, save for Lightpaw, she ducked under the fence that separated the outside world from the ranch.

She padded into the hole that she figured contained the kits, and she was immediately whacked in the face by the stench of blood. and decay. Wrinkling her nose, she stepped further inside the hole, beckoning with her tail for Lightpaw to fall in behind her. Inside of the hole, it was very dark, and especially so considering it was almost nighttime. She waited a moment for her vision to adjust to the relative darkness of it, then began moving forward, She heard light mewling in the distance, as well as a soothing voice that held the tone of a cat trying to soothe a distressed kit. Redpaw blinked at the second voice, but continued forward until she reached the end of the hole. There, she found Snowfall's kits -- Mountainkit, Tornadokit, Whisperkit, and Featherkit.

"Shh," the massive black she-cat whispered to the kits. The she-cat, though huge, was also very scrawny, and Redpaw could easily see her ribs protruding from her sides. Her claws were red, and she was absolutely drenched in died blood. Her left eyeball, from as far as Redpaw could tell, had evidently been torn out of it's socket. And due to the fact that there was dried blood crusting all the way around the socket, Redpaw figured that the incident had occurred not too long ago. She wondered if the black cat had been captured, just like those kits were, or if she was a rogue as well ... but what would one of those rogues be doing in the hole?

Suddenly, the black she-cat whirled around, teeth bared and her tail wrapping protectively over the four kits, who seemed scared, but relieved when they saw Redpaw. "No! Don't attack her!" Featherkit,

a white she-kit, mewed, looking desperately up at the black cat. "That's Redpaw -- she's from our Clan." The black cat seemed to relax at this, though she didn't sheathe her claws -- Redpaw couldn't blame her for this. She most likely didn't want to let her guard down.

Redpaw studied the black cat some more, and she thought she recognized her from somewhere. "You're ... Midnightflower, aren't you? The former MeadowClan deputy? I thought you were dead ... " she trailed off as the she-cat's fur bristled.

"What? Are you telling me that they replaced me already?! I've hardly been gone from camp but maybe a moon!" she hissed. "I should've known. Redstar would never even *try* to send a search party for her deputy. She'd just go ahead and replace her with someone else ... " she trailed off, as if in thought. "Who's the new deputy now?" she asked.

"Of MeadowClan? Dawnshade." Redpaw replied, and Midnightflower nodded.

"Well, at least she picked someone worthy of replacing me ... " the black she-cat sighed. Redpaw felt a bit bad for her. She had probably worked so hard to become deputy of her Clan, and to have it all ripped away from her at the flick of a rogue's paw? She couldn't even imagine how painful that must be for her. "Why are you here, anyways?" Midnightflower sniffed, clearly suspicious of Redpaw and Lightpaw's intentions. "And who's your friend?" she asked, motioning with her chin towards Lightpaw, whom had somehow managed to remain silent the entire time they had been in the hole, and was still standing beside Lightpaw.

"Oh, that's Lightpaw. She's the medicine cat apprentice," she answered. Midnightflower nodded, then widened her eyes. All of a sudden, she leaped towards the entrance of the hole, knocking both Redpaw and Lightpaw onto the ground. When Redpaw pushed herself up from the ground, she at first thought that perhaps Midnightflower had gone mad, but then she noticed that Midnightflower was tussling around on the ground with another rogue. They somehow managed to roll outside of the den.

"Run!" Midnightflower ordered, her voice slightly choked. "Grab the kits and run!" she said, and Lostpaw quickly nodded, rushing as fast as she could to grab the kits. She quickly snatched Mountainkit and Whisperkit into her jaws, with Lightpaw doing the same to Featherkit and Tornadokit. They ran out of the den together, the kits squealing in fright all the while. As Redpaw looked back, she hoped that Midnightflower had somehow managed to chase away the rogue and was coming after the apprentices to escape with them, but her hopes were shattered as she saw that instead, Midnightflower was being pinned to the ground with a paw on her throat. Unsheathed claws were making a line straight down the middle of the black she-cat's face, and Redpaw was utterly disturbed.

"Redpaw!" Lightpaw suddenly shrieked, and Redpaw stopped in her tracks, looking back at the medicine cat apprentice who had stopped a short distance away from her. She was about to ask "what," but when she saw what was in front of her, she realized that she didn't need to anymore.

"Well, well, well," a white and gray she-cat said, leering down at her. "What do we have here?" And as the she-cat uttered those words, it was only then that Redpaw realized she had come face to face with Breezeflame herself.

Chapter Seven

Redpaw didn't hesitate as she dodged Breezeflame's first strike at her, and she raced ahead of her. Hissing, the white-gray she-cat whirled around in a way that was impressive for a cat of her physical stature. A sharp tug was felt at Redpaw's tail as Breezeflame snatched it with her unsheathed forepaw, and she was forced to stop running. She struggled, hoping to pull her tail loose from Breezeflame's grip, but it was no use as she suddenly felt teeth sink into her hind leg. Gasping, she staggered before collapsing to the ground.

"You're going to make a tasty meal -- what, Redpaw, is it?" Breezeflame snickered, and the red-furred apprentice tried to get up, but was stopped as Breezeflame set her paw on her back, claws sinking in enough to only tear out pieces of fur, presumably on purpose.

"What? Cannibal!" Redpaw spat, disgusted at the vulgar announcement.

The gray-white she-cat laughed darkly. "Oh, *I'm*not going to eat you. But the twoleg's dogs will certainly have a treat for their tastebu-" Breezeflame was cut off as Redpaw suddenly rolled over onto her back and sunk her fangs as deep as she could into her paw. Shrieking, Breezeflame jumped backwards, shaking the apprentice off of her forepaw.

Redpaw looked over at Lightpaw, who seemed quite frantic and was looking wildly around. "Lightpaw, look out!" she yowled as the same cat that had killed off Midnightflower suddenly ran up behind her. She was about to turn around when suddenly the rogue's teeth sunk into her tail, and with a powerful jerk of the rogue's head, was suddenly catapulted (Get it? *Cat*apulted?) into the air. Redpaw watched on in horror as the she-cat landed, *hard,* against one of the wooden stables. With a sharp *thump!* she slid to the ground. "Oh, no ... " the red she-cat whispered as she began to run over to the apprentice medicine cat.

"Lightpaw! Are you alright?" she demanded as she approached. She nudged her friend on the shoulder, and with a groan, the yellow she-cat pulled herself to her paws, stumbling a bit as she did so.

"I'm ... I'm fine." Lightpaw insisted. "Just ... just a little shaken. Nothing to worry about," she said. Slowly, Redpaw nodded, then looked over to where Breezeflame was standing with the rogue that had thrown her. She saw no other rogues around other than those two, though as she opened her jaws and smelled the air, she could easily scent more cats, and it made her suspicious. "Wait!" Lightpaw mewed. "What happened to the kits? We dropped them when we were fighting!" she said. Redpaw's eyes widened, and she was surprised that she hadn't noticed this sooner.

"I see them!" the yellow she-cat exclaimed. "But ... but they're with Breezeflame and that other rogue," she said with a sigh, and Redpaw grew frustrated once more as she took note of the fact that the medicine cat sounded as if she was close to giving up.

"Then we're going to retrieve them," Redpaw declared, satisfied, her eyes narrowed as she spotted the kits sitting at Breezeflame's paws. Every time they tried to get away, either she or the other rogue hissed at them and pulled them back by their tail, with force and clearly not gentleness.

"No," Lightpaw stated simply. "I don't think we should. The Clan is probably worried for us ... we've been gone a whole day. Really, look at that. You can almost see Silverpelt by now ... I think we should just head back home, tell Loststar what we were doing, and then let her send out a patrol of warriors that are perfectly capable of retrieving those kits. I'm a medicine cat! I don't belong here."

Redpaw stared at her through slitted eyes. "You can't be serious, now! We came here to get those kits, and that's *exactly* what I'm going to do ... with or with*out* you." she said, determined.

Lightpaw appeared to be shocked by the fact that her friend didn't agree with her suggestion. Redpaw felt that even if her suggestion was the most responsible thing to do in this situation, it most likely wouldn't be the best one, in this case. What if the kits were killed before the warrior patrol could get to them? It took almost a full

day to get to the ranch from MapleClan territory.

"But clearly StarClan doesn't want us rescuing those kits! If we were meant to save them, then surely they would have let us successfully escape with them the first time! ... Wouldn't you think?"

"Forget what StarClan wants! If they're thinking about taking those kits to their starry home in the sky, then they can forget it!" Redpaw said, then turned around, padding over to where the kits were with a determined look in her eye. As she heard pawsteps coming from behind her, she figured that it was Lightpaw, finally admitting that she was wrong and coming to help her rescue the kits.

... But she was wrong. A sudden force leaped on top of her, almost crushing her with it's weight. Presumably it was a rogue that had snuck up on her by coming around from the opposite side of the stables. Gasping, Redpaw attempted to throw the cat off of her, but she ended up just wriggling uselessly around. The cat's teeth sunk into her scruff, and then suddenly lifted her up from the ground, shaking her around as if she was but a kitten. Flailing, Redpaw attempted to get her paws on the ground. Eventually, she was thrown back onto the ground. She rolled over as the rogue attempted to crush her again, and using her hind-claws made long scratch marks down the rogue's hind legs, while she used her foreclaws to rake the enemy's belly.

The rogue, although slightly struggling from the way Redpaw was clawing him, leaned his head down, angling it towards Redpaw's neck. Her eyes stretched completely wide as she realized what he was about to do, and she suddenly kicked upwards with her hind paws, successfully forcing him off of her. She scrambled to her paws and rushed over to where the kits were standing. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Lightpaw escaping underneath the wooden fence. *'What a traitor!'* she thought. *'What kind of medicine cat apprentice is she? She doesn't even want to help her Clanmates!'* She swooped down with her jaws as soon as Breezeflame realized she was there, snatching Featherkit and Tornadokit into her jaws.

"Whisperkit, Mountainkit! Run after me! I know you can do it!" she ordered, and was relieved when she heard tiny paws against the dirt, pounding after her. These pawsteps most definitely belonged to

Whisperkit and Mountainkit. She ran towards the fence, and was about to take a leap over it when suddenly, one of the rogues barreled into her side, and one side of her body was slammed roughly against the wood.

'These cats are quick ... and stronger than they look!' she realized suddenly, alarmed. She staggered to her paws, panting and chest heaving, as she noticed the fact that she was surrounded. Four rogues cornered her on either side, and she had no choice but to let go of Featherkit and Tornadokit.

"Run." she whispered to the kits.

"What?" Featherkit squeaked.

"I said run!" she said as Whisperkit and Mountainkit caught up to them by running underneath the other rogues legs.

"But what about you?" Tornadokit questioned, tilting his white head to the side.

"Forget about me. You need to run!"

"But-"

"Run! Run, and whatever you do, don't stop running until you reach MapleClan!" Redpaw ordered. Fearfully, the kits nodded, then took off, easily squeezing underneath the wooden fence and running away, as fast and to as far as their tiny paws could carry them. She then glanced back over to where the rogues were starting to close in on her. Taking a deep breath, she sent a quick prayer to StarClan, as she very well knew that the circumstances had changed, and that it had suddenly become very, very possible for her to die, right here and right now.

If she did die today, though, she vowed that she would die fighting. She wouldn't die a prisoner, like poor Midnightflower.

She leaped at the nearest rogue, batting at his ears with her claws before landing on his back. She used her hind claws to rake along his sides, while her foreclaws sunk deep into his shoulders and her teeth found their mark on the back of his neck. Yowling in pain, the

rogue shook her off before running away.

Redpaw's eyes widened as she realized she had successfully chased a rogue away. This, however, only made the other rogues even more hostile to her. The smallest one, a ginger tabby she-cat, hissed at her before raking her claws down Redpaw's nose, making a mark and causing blood to drip down from her face. Redpaw jumped backwards, but the she-cat was persistent, and continued forward. While Redpaw was distracted by her, two other rogues came up behind her. One of them sunk his jaws into her hind leg, making her yowl and collapse. The other yanked her backwards by the tail, dragging her towards the rabbit hole that Midnightflower and the kits had been kept in before Midnightflower met her demise, and the kits escaped.

The rogues threw her in, and she hit one of the rough, dusty walls of the dark tunnel with a thump. As she waited for her eyes to adjust, she thought about how she should make her escape. She was the prisoner now, and she would either escape or wait to be rescued ... though, she doubted that she had enough time to escape, depending on what the rogues planned to do with her ... like feed her to the twoleg's dogs.

But surely when Lightpaw reached MapleClan camp, she would tell them all about where she was! And if she didn't, then the kits most certainly would, Redpaw knew. These thoughts comforted her as she began to clamber clumsily towards the back of the den in near darkness. It reeked of blood and death in the cave, and she began to wonder what all had happened in there. It had probably been the place where countless deaths of prisoners had occurred, slain in cold-blood by the claws and fangs of the rogues that were just outside the cave. She shivered at the thought, knowing that she could very well meet the same fate that Midnightflower and those other prisoners had faced if she didn't get out quickly enough.

'StarClan ... help me! Was I wrong to come here and rescue those kits? Had it been their time to die, and meet their mother, Snowfall, in StarClan with the rest of you? Is it ... is it my *time to die instead?'*she thought, and as her thoughts ended, a comforting presence decided to make itself known. She turned around, seeing a small white figure that stood out like a ghost in the midst of all the darkness in

the tunnel. He was nearly glowing, with stars sparkling in his pelt. His blue eyes stood out like stars against the nightly sky.

"Frostpaw! Is that you?" she exclaimed as her dead brother walked over to her.

"Don't worry, sister," he murmured, nuzzling her on the shoulder with his muzzle. "It's not your time to die just yet. You're going to escape," he reassured her, before walking back to where he originally had been standing, and vanishing into the air, presumably returning to StarClan.

"Wait!" Redpaw said, but Frostpaw had already returned to his new home in the stars. She sighed. "... I'm sorry for not saving you in time." she said to nothing and no one but the mere darkness of the rabbit tunnels.

She padded to the back of the den, where there was no moss, nothing, to help her sleep. Sighing, she curled up into a ball, with the tip of her red-colored tail curled over her nose. Perhaps if she rested up, she'd have more strength to take on tomorrow.

Hopefully.

Chapter Eight*

Five days later, Redpaw was still stuck in that same rabbit burrow. Not that it could even be considered a rabbit burrow anymore. It reeked of blood, death, and the nasty scent of rogue. She had been hoping and praying to StarClan each and everyday, and yet ... it seemed like no one was ever going to come for her. No one from MapleClan, no one from *any* Clan! *'Don't they miss me?'* she thought. *'Surely they've noticed I've gone!'* For a fleeting moment, she wished that she had kept the kits there with her.

What if they hadn't made it back to MapleClan? What if the rogues had gone after them, and killed them, like the cruel cats they were? What if a hungry fox or badger had found them? With leaf-bare setting in, the dangerous predators had started coming out of their dens more and more often to hunt. It worried Redpaw considerably. *'I hope MapleClan's safe, even without me.'* Her thoughts trailed over to Lightpaw. She still seethed with rage at the thought of how she had abandoned her to the rogues, like a piece of fresh-kill that she was hoping to barter with. Yet she wanted her to be safe as well. After all, she was the medicine cat apprentice, and if the kits hadn't made it back to MapleClan, which, quite frankly, was rather possible, seeing how young they were ... then she was Redpaw's only hope.

The rogues were strict and harsh. They took turns guarding the rabbit burrow, knowing better than to turn their backs on it now. Breezeflame, that nasty she-cat, barked sharp orders to them, and they were quick to obey. As Redpaw pondered about the rogues' way of life, her stomach growled. The rogues weren't going to kill her, she knew, or allow her to die of starvation, but they made her stray right on the edge of it. The last meal she had received was a scrawny blackbird two sunrises ago. It had done hardly anything to fill her up, and her hunger was growing steadily worse.

When they delivered her prey or fresh moss to drink from, they often took harsh jabs at her pride, calling her names and leaving

scratch marks on her pelt. She wouldn't have been surprised if they she looked at her reflection in the water one day, when she had made her escape, or was rescued, or just whatever, and saw that she had scars all over her pelt. It sure felt like they gave her a new one by the hour.

Redpaw's ears pricked as she heard pawsteps outside of the burrow. A silhouetted figure entered, it's shape and color becoming clearer as it drew closer. Her lips drew back in a snarl as she crouched, pressed against the back of the burrow as she waited for the rogue to speak.

"Here," the rogue meowed, whiskers twitching, not at all bothered by Redpaw's attempt at intimidation as he dropped a lizard at her paws. It made her pelt prickle with irritation. "Eat," he ordered, and Redpaw stared at the prey in front of her paws, before glancing back over to the tom. He was a ginger tabby with white markings, yet he seemed smaller than most of the other rogues Redpaw had seen.

"You expect me to eat a lizard? No! That's disgusting," she hissed. Only WolfClan ate lizards.

The rogue's tail lashed with frustration, but he said nothing, just pushed the prey closer to her with his paws. Redpaw stared at him, narrowing her eyes until they were merely slits. "Didn't you hear me? I said no," she mewed.

Growling, the rogue snatched the lizard back up into his jaws and turned away, looking as if he was heading towards the exit. "Fine!" the tom snapped. "That's more for me and the other rogues to feast on." Redpaw's belly rumbled.

"Wait, no! Don't leave," Redpaw begged. "I'll take it," she decided, shuffling her paws.

"Yeah, I thought so," the rogue spat, turning back around and dropping the lizard in front of her. Again. "You're lucky we're not feeding you crow-food. We won't be keeping you alive much longer," he muttered before exiting. Redpaw was positive that she had felt her heart sink just then. That couldn't have meant what she

thought it meant ... surely, StarClan wouldn't allow her to die at the paws of these rogues? Then again, StarClan was known to do strange things ...

Dawn light seeped through the entrance of the apprentice's den. Gradually, a brown she-cat blinked open her eyes to see a hazy figure standing in the opening of her den. This hazy figure was known as Newtheart, one of MapleClan's senior warriors and Mousepaw's mentor. Sighing, she pulled herself to her paws and shook herself, pieces of moss and debris that had once been clinging to her falling off.

Looking down at the nest nearest to her, she saw Mosspaw, her sister, still snoring. On the other side of her nest, there was no one. A pang of loneliness hit her in the chest. That was where Redpaw would have been sleeping, had she been there. Just sunrises prior, she had set off to find four stolen kits after returning from a Gathering to find them gone. *'And it's all my fault ... '*

An irritated snort broke into her thoughts. "Mousepaw! For the love of StarClan, get up! We're going on dawn patrol, remember?" Newtheart said. Reluctantly, Mousepaw walked over to her mentor. He studied her for a minute, then flicked his tail, padding out of the den. "Let's go," he ordered. Grimly, Mousepaw followed him. As she left the den, she took note of all the progress that the Clan was making on repairing their dens. After the rogues attacked, the entire camp had been devastated. The elder's den had been completely destroyed in the battle, and therefore Minnowcreek, Milkdrop, and Darkscratch were being forced to sleep in the nursery until it was fixed, since the nursery was completely desolated ever since Snowfall had been murdered, and her kits went missing.

They walked over to where the rest of the patrol was situated, waiting by the entrance for them to arrive. Skyhawk was leading the patrol, and with him were Rosestorm, Whiteclaw, Stoneflight, Ravencall, and Webpaw. Normally, patrols were much smaller than this, but ever since the raid by the rogues, Loststar had decided that MapleClan should have twice as many cats as usual on each and every patrol, just to be safe. Mousepaw agreed with her decision.

She didn't want anything like that happening to her Clan ever again.

"Finally, you're here," Skyhawk muttered. "Come on," he said, flicking his tail and walking out of camp. Mousepaw had heard a rumor once before that Skyhawk used to be mates with Breezeflame, whenever she had infiltrated MapleClan by posing as a simple kittypet, without knowing who she truly was. Well, no one at the time had known who she truly was, really. However, she didn't know if these were true, and she didn't want to question the deputy about it, just in case it was true and it ended up bringing back harsh memories.

"We should check out the MeadowClan border," Whiteclaw suggested. "I scented fox near there yesterday. It was stale, but that doesn't mean he couldn't come back for a meal," he pointed out warily.

Skyhawk said something under his breath that Mousepaw's ears couldn't quite pick up. "Okay, fine. Let's go," he mewed, shifting the direction they had been heading in and turning west instead, towards where MeadowClan resided.

"I hope MeadowClan's alright," Rosestorm frowned, clearly thinking that the rogues had been planning on attacking more than one Clan at a time. Webpaw's ears perked as she heard this.

"Why?" the white-furred apprentice asked. "They're another Clan. Shouldn't we be happy if they were weakened by the rogues? Then we wouldn't be the only ones." Mousepaw rolled her eyes. Webpaw may be older than her, but clearly she was the one with more sense.

"You don't wish harm on another Clan, enemy or not," Ravencall snapped. Webpaw ducked her head awkwardly.

"Right. Of course," she said, flicking an ear in acknowledgement. They soon arrived at the border, and quickly they began to mark it, wanting to make sure that no MeadowClan warrior would accidentally cross the scent markings ... or purposely cross them. "Then perhaps we should stop one of their patrols and ask them? I mean, ask them if they're alright, of course," she added quickly.

"No." Skyhawk said, before turning towards Whiteclaw. "Show me where you scented the fox. The rest of you, continue marking the border," he mewed. Whiteclaw nodded, then lashed his tail, indicating for the deputy to follow him as he padded through some gorse bushes and disappeared into the forest. Skyhawk followed soon after. Suddenly, they heard sharp mewing in the distance.

"What's that?" Stoneflight demanded, his ears perking as he glanced around.

"I don't know. It sounds like a kit!" Mousepaw answered her father. More tiny mews joined the first one, and her eyes widened as she realized what that could mean. "Stoneflight! Those could be Snowfall's kits! I'm going to go get them!" she said, charging suddenly forward before being pulled back by the tail.

"Oh, no, you don't! You're taking a warrior with you before I allow you to do anything like that. It could just as easily be a trap as it could be those kits," he pointed out. Mousepaw shrugged, sitting back. Stoneflight let go of her tail.

"I'll go with her," Newtheart offered, and the apprentice let out an exaggerated sigh. She was quite sure that Newtheart had a problem with her. He was never nice to her, and he never seemed satisfied with her training. Stoneflight nodded his approval. The mewing grew louder, and Mousepaw once again began charging through the bushes with Newtheart by her side.

She stopped, opening her jaws and tasting the air as she tried to pick out where their scent was. Gasping, she found it. "That's them!" she exclaimed, before racing towards the direction of their scent. The scent ended by a small hollow hidden in the roots of a tall elm tree. Inside this hollow were four tiny kits, weak and starving. They eyes, however, brightened as they spotted the two cats in front of them. "Mousepaw, Newtheart!" Tornadokit purred, excited, before breaking into a fit of coughing. The other three kits were coughing as well.

"Oh, no! They have a cough!" Mousepaw sighed. "We'll have to take them to the medicine cat's den," she said, carefully picking up Featherkit and Tornadokit by the scruff. Nodding in agreement, her

mentor picked up Mountainkit and Whisperkit. They padded back over to the rest of the patrol.

Newtheart dropped the kits that he was carrying temporarily to tell them what they were going to do. "These kits are sick. We're going to have to take them to the medicine cat's den, but we'll be back to finish the patrol once we've done that," he said, then grasped the kits in his jaws again.

"Got it," Ravencall and Whiteclaw nodded.

"We'll tell Skyhawk if he comes back before you do," Rosestorm promised, her eyes glittering with worry for the kits. Then, she turned away to continue marking the borders. Stoneflight said nothing, but Mousepaw could detect a faint trace of pride in his eyes, and it made her feel warm inside, especially since her mentor, Newtheart, himself never praised her for anything she did.

They turned away, padding back towards camp. Soon they arrived, and they walked over to the medicine cat's den. Neither Skyhawk nor Lightpaw were awake. Lightpaw had returned three sunrises ago, but unfortunately, Redpaw hadn't been with her, and that worried the whole Clan. Mousepaw could easily scent guilt coming off of her pelt in waves, but she never bothered to question why, and Lightpaw never freely told her.

Newtheart dropped Mountainkit and Whisperkit at the entrance of the den. "Skyhawk?" he called, his voice echoing off the walls of the small tom's den. A stirring was heard from the back of the den, and then the cat that had been requested walked up, a groggy look on his face that pointed out the fact that he had only just woken up.

"What?" the gray and white tom snapped, before noticing the kits. "Oh." he blinked, then flinched as he heard them coughing. "Oh, great. They have green-cough, do they? We don't have any catmint in store right now." He glanced towards the back of the den. "Lightpaw! Wake up! You need to go out and try your hardest to find some catmint. We have coughing kits over here. Until then, I'll give them tansy," he added to the two cats in front of him before they could start worrying.

"Right. Do you need me for anything? I could help Lightpaw collect some catmint, too," she pointed out. Newtheart glared at her with his tail lashing back and forth, his amber eyes narrowed.

"No. You're coming back on dawn patrol with me," he stated.

"Actually," Skyhawk cut the warrior off. "Yes, I could use your help, Mousepaw, thank you, but not for catmint. Could you please go and catch some prey from the fresh-kill pile for them? They must be starving," he said, with a sharp glare directed at her mentor. The brown-furred apprentice nodded, brushing past Newtheart on her way out of the den. She padded towards the fresh-kill, spotting her ginger sister looking through it as well.

"Hey, Mosspaw! Guess what? Snowfall's kits are back!" she purred as she stood next to her. Mosspaw sighed, fluffing out her coat. Mousepaw looked worriedly at her sister as she looked through the fresh-kill pile for something that she thought the four kits would like to eat, and could keep down, since they were sick.

"Good for them," Mosspaw murmured, but she didn't sound glad.

"What's the matter? Aren't you happy? This is good news!" Mousepaw exclaimed.

"It's just ... I miss Redpaw," her sister mewed before pulling a robin and a squirrel out of the pile. "Anyway, I've got to go feed the elders," she said before padding off towards the nursery. Mousepaw gazed after her sister, a sympathetic look on her face.

'Don't worry, I miss her too,' she thought, before blinking away her thought and pulling a plump mouse out of the fresh-kill pile. She walked back over to the medicine cat's den, seeing that the four kits were already each in their own separate nest. "I have a nice mouse for them," she said quietly, in case any of them had fallen asleep since she had last left the den.

"Good, thank you," Skyhawk said, quickly padding over to her and taking the mouse away. He walked back over to the kits and laid it down in front of them. "Eat," he ordered.

"But I'm not hungry!" Featherkit wailed. "You can't make me."

"Oh, yes I can! Now eat it. It'll help, I promise, and it will wash away the taste of the tansy that I gave you," he murmured. Hesitantly, the kits leaned forward to take a bite of the mouse. Skyhawk then flicked his tail, signaling for Mousepaw to leave. She nodded, padding out of the medicine cat's den and hoping that the kits would end up being okay.

Redpaw sighed as she sat near the entrance of the rabbit burrow. The rogues didn't care how close she got to the entrance, so long as she didn't try to escape. Well, she couldn't escape, anyways. Not unless ... not unless she wanted to end up getting killed by the cat who was on guard just outside. She leaned down, licking off all the grit and dirt situated between her pads.

The sun was shining high in the sky, yet barely any of the light managed to seep into the burrow. It was almost like being left in total darkness, no matter what time of day it was. Suddenly, a couple of heather plants rustled outside, and she turned her head, ears pricked slightly as she scented the air, trying to figure out what could've made the noise. Perhaps it was a MapleClanner, coming to rescue her?

'No, of course not ... ' the red-furred apprentice slunk back further into the depths of the burrow as she scented just another rogue, probably going to take the place of the cat currently on guard. She should've expected that.

However, no one could blame her for not expecting the rogue to do what she did next, and that was to walk inside of the rabbit burrow. "Hi," the rogue whispered. Redpaw fluffed out her fur, trying to appear twice her size. She had already gotten her meal for today; this rogue couldn't just be coming to chat, could she? And if she wasn't going to do either of those, then that meant ... of course, that meant she was going to hurt her. She tensed up, unsheathing her claws and bracing herself.

The rogue took a step back, and Redpaw blinked, surprised. "Don't

worry, I'm not going to hurt you," she whispered, a soothing tone in her voice. Redpaw almost relaxed, then forced herself not to. The rogue was probably just trying to get her off of her guard.

"How can I trust you?" she snapped, baring her teeth. "You're a rogue, and you hurt innocents, just like the rest of the rogues out there!" she growled. The she-cat in front of her softened, and lifted a paw to show her that her claws were sheathed, not unsheathed as if she was going to hurt her.

"You can trust me because I was just like you once ... " the rogue murmured. Redpaw blinked, but didn't have any time to question her. "I'm not going to hurt you, I promise. I'm ... " her voice dropped to a whisper. " ... I'm going to help you escape."